

TO BEG I AM ASHAMED

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PUBLISHERS' NOTE

THIS book is an autobiography, an untouched record of fact. Only in one respect has the original manuscript been altered. To avoid offence to persons perfectly innocently implicated in the story, every character in it, including the author, has been given a fictitious name, while addresses and professions, where these might have served as marks of identification, have also been changed. Indeed, as far as has been practicable, surnames have been eliminated altogether. But none of the names in the book is, in fact, the name of any of the real people of whom the story tells.

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CHAPTER I

BECAUSE I was born a lady and still look one, "How on earth do you come to be doing this?" is the first question most men ask me when they pick me up on the streets. I came to be a prostitute for many reasons, but in the end because I deliberately chose to be.

I have been asked that question now often enough to be used to it. But still, when I see it framing itself on the lips of some new speaker, I am filled with a momentary gust of irritation. I know what it means. "Here you are," go the unsaid words, "looking like a human being, talking like one, yet doing nightly and as a matter of course something that could only be done by a beast or a machine." I'm not only low, I'm so low as to be somehow outside life.

Yet, of course, I am not outside life. I am neither a beast nor a machine. I have thoughts and feelings and emotions like everyone else. And like everyone else, I take my job for granted—my job as a prostitute. Living would be intolerable if one didn't.

Like everyone else, too, I have moments of introspection and of consciousness. I have moments when I feel the contempt of the world weighing on me. I have moments when I quail before the harsh pity of the

Bishops and the Dames of the British Empire, whose God is graven in yellow soap and who would save me by putting a Bible into one hand and a scrubbing-brush into the other. I have moments when I revolt against my ambiguous existence, neither legal nor illegal. And I have moments when I realize that I am a person to no one, that to the male I am just a body, to the policeman a chance of promotion, to the rest simply a problem.

But I am not begging for sympathy. I know that—so far as choice is possible—I chose with my eyes open to do what I am doing to-day. And I know that I have never enjoyed such self-respect as I do now. I have escaped from emotional sponging. I cannot be put upon. If you want my body, you must pay for it. However odd the adjective may sound, there is, to me, something clean about that.

I have not the least intention, either, of romanticizing myself. I shall not talk about "the oldest profession in the world." What I am doing is a job like any other, a way of keeping alive. It is neither much more nor much less secure than most women's jobs. There is a second question that the man who asks me how on earth I come to be on the streets, will occasionally put to me. He will put it in trepidation, because he fancies I dare not face it. It is: "What do you look forward to in the future?" It does not occur to him that he might put the same query, with just as much ground, to the three pounds a week typist or the two pounds a week shopgirl. Like them, I am supported through my worst moments by the perpetual hope that something may turn up. I married once off the

streets, and there seems no reason why I should not do so again. If there is little demand for the prostitute over forty, there is not much more for the over-forty typist. And I am still a long way from forty yet.

I suppose my story is an unusual one. I was born of what is called a good family. I have mixed as a sometimes precarious equal with the right kind of people, doing the right kind of job and drawing the right kind of pay. I have the right kind of accent, and if you were to sit next to me in a theatre I do not imagine you would take me for a street walker. But I do not flatter myself, because I am not typical of my calling, that I don't share something of the character and circumstances that lie in the past of every prostitute. The prostitute-to-be has generally some kind of insecurity in her family life. She has a strong vein of laziness, of incapacity for saying no, of inability to resist the parasitism of others. It seems a cruel paradox that those very characteristics which go to make her a tart are just those she must not have if she is to be a successful one. For the tart who is to be successful must be hard, hypocritical, orderly in her habits, resolutely intolerant of any kind of parasitism. I am not a success.

But I am not a failure either. Without much effort, in dry weather, I can make well over ten pounds a week. I have clients who ring me up regularly and save me, for days together, the irk of going out on the streets. If I were of the type who makes a success, I should not be content. The more I gained, the more I should want. I should go out after lunch and stay out till midnight, bringing in men three, four or five times

a day. Why should I? I dislike the streets, and my flat is a pleasant one. I have a few books, a couple of goodish pictures and a piano with volumes of music. I like to go to an occasional concert or theatre. I see no reason why I should sacrifice my life to my livelihood.

Men ask me occasionally whether I am happy. I wonder how many people are. I realize that I have no more right to complain of masculine coarseness than the shopgirl to bemoan that customers will pester her with buying things. It is part of the job I have chosen. But I don't think it is such an unfair complaint that my calling seems to cut me off from almost every kind of disinterested friendship. I don't suppose a doctor is expected, out of his surgery, to give free medical advice to his acquaintances. When he has put down his stethoscope, I imagine, he sheds his profession and becomes a man. The prostitute, in the eyes of the ordinary male, never sheds her profession. For her, he believes firmly, there should be no off-duty hours. He pursues her, in season and out of season, with his needs, as his women do with their contempt. So my friends to-day can be counted on the fingers of one hand.

And then I regret that I was born and came on the streets in the age when I did. There is a tag, I believe, about the prostitute defending the virtue of the middle-class man's sister. That was true once, thirty years ago, and then were the high days of prostitution. The street-walker's client was the normal man who had yet to persuade his friend's sister that his intentions were honourable. To-day, with honourable intentions at a discount everywhere, my pick-ups are the rejects, the neurotics,

the cast-outs who, for all the general promiscuity, have been unable to find a real woman for themselves. They cannot satisfy their needs and be gone as matter-of-fact as they came. They are incapable of genuine emotion themselves; they need the display of it desperately in others. So they must fight out a cobwebbed battle with their own day-dreams over my helpless body. Often enough they are puritans on a holiday from their conscience. Their awkward questions are an attempt to compound with their morality. They think they can make up for eating their cake by cutting it too. There are times when I feel that the prostitute to-day needs to be half a psycho-analyst.

This is not a pretty story. Many things in it, no doubt, are sordid. For me they have lost half their sordidness by being dragged into the open air and faced. It's the things that one fears to remember that are horrible. When they are faced once more, in all the setting of trivial remembered detail that comes flocking back to recollection with them, the ugliest things have a way of losing their ugliness. They become objects of observation, not feeling. And everything is worthy of being observed.

I suppose one's life-story starts long before one was born. Mine, emphatically, would not have been what it was but for that of my mother. I must run the risk of being laughed at and tell the truth: she was the daughter of a clergyman. He was a not unlearned country parson who drank a lot, read a lot and preached eloquent if unorthodox sermons. There was talent in the family: my grandfather had been an invited prea-

cher in at least one famous London church, and his brother's son has since been knighted for his services to the arts.

My mother is one of those women who are born to be preyed on. I look back on her wandering through life encumbered with a constant train of bedraggled cats, muddy dogs, broken-winged birds and scarcely less pathetic men. She could never resist a lonely miaow or a fit of male hysterics: her natural reaction on seeing any forlorn creature outside her door is to invite it in. It would not be an unattractive character, but that the human waifs are usually less artless in their misery than the animals. Animals don't conceal a leer behind their wordless entreaties; they don't batten on you, drain you of life and eventually drag you down to below their own level.

•As I remember her first, she was a small, slim woman with dark hair, blue eyes, oval face, low forehead and a small mouth. She was told when she was young that she had a Burne-Jones head, and it would have been easy to imagine her as a pining Blessed Damozel or a wistful angel. She had a beautiful voice, which made it all the more shocking when, in latter years, one heard the language of the gutter rolling off her tongue as if she had been bred to it. She had an ear for music and an eye for colour, but the trait that was to lead her into her worst troubles was that she was headstrong without the least strength of will to back her craving for independence.

Her mother died when she was very small, her father when she was growing up to boarding-school age.

She came into a small income of her own and went to live, on her holidays, with guardians who had a large and blank-faced house somewhere on the south side of London. They were respectable people, so respectable that it was difficult to believe they were really alive. The reading of *The Times* at breakfast was like a second kind of Sunday service. My mother was naturally diffident. Almost the only friend she had outside the few at her school was that cousin, since knighted, who was already making his name in the arts. She ran away from school: it was useless. The stuffed inhabitants of the suburban house could neither pity nor understand her. Released from lessons, she pleaded to be allowed to train for the stage. No nice girl, the guardians replied icily, would dream of doing such a thing. The day she came of age she walked out of the front door and, with an income of perhaps £150 behind her, took lodgings by herself in London.

The lodgings were fatal. Their transient occupants could be divided into two classes: those who were already failures and those who had not yet had the opportunity to be. Both had ample time to spare for pursuing my mother, who had not the least idea how she was going to set about becoming an actress and whose gentle attraction was an intoxicating novelty to them, at the opposite pole from the bedizened quarries they usually hunted. Into the lead of these Baker Street suitors drew eventually an unsuccessful dental student, a tall brown-haired man with a deformed hand, a vulgar mind and a great facility for tears. My mother hated him almost from the first, but he threatened to

throw himself into the Thames if she did not have him. The marriage was fixed up, my mother's cousin came down from the northern university where he already held a readership. He asked her did she really want to marry Jerry, told her he was more than a little in love with her himself. She did not dare to tell the truth; she went through with it. A few days after the wedding Jerry brought a friend up to the bedroom where my mother was lying in bed. "Aren't I a lucky man?" he asked. At that moment she knew that she not only disliked her husband, she despised him.

I was born in February 1910. My father had made a further futile attempt to pass his dental examination; having failed, he set up as an unlicensed practitioner in, I fancy, Liverpool. We went up with him, but not for long. My mother speedily found there was little romantic in being wife, cook and general servant to a man she loathed, with no money coming into the house. She took up an engagement with a third-rate company of actors touring in northern England and Ireland. Stranded in Dublin, she fell into the limp clutches of that curious creature Tom.

Tom was a ship's quartermaster who had got himself left behind in Dublin because he overslept on the night his ship sailed. I fancy they met quite casually, in a bar—my mother had already taken to frequenting bars—and Tom persuaded her to spend the night with him. He was a tall, mild man, with pale blue eyes and a mild, fair moustache. He was fond of animals and was almost always inflated with some grandiose plan for coining a fortune out of the breeding of lettuces, hens

or rabbits. "It can't fail, old lady. I've worked it all out. Figures can't lie," he would tell my mother. I should imagine that he was too lazy to work out anything, and each golden plan in turn vanished with silent deflation, to be replaced by some yet more confident vision.

Tom had a capacity for weeping too, and a good nature which it was next to impossible to quarrel with. He easily persuaded my mother to lengthen the night of their companionship into a second night, a week, a permanent arrangement. She found him possible to tolerate; one of his plans might always come off, and it was somebody to look after the child. Together they returned to London on his dwindling money, set up house on hers.

All these, you must remember, are not my own recollections. They are my mother's, linked together from the odd scraps of her story she told me at vacant moments when I was a child and a young girl. I see them through the mist that always envelops the earlier doings of those mysterious beings, our young parents, and gives them a legendary character as distant and cardboardly unreal as the acts of the Greek heroes and gods. In those legends, little beings as stiff as marionettes move across the stage to a succession of wooden clicks. Somehow the why and the how that breathe life into the dry fact get left out. So I can't explain or understand, only relate, my mother's next move.

Their little money had run out and the rent of the London lodgings was some weeks in arrears. Tom, I fancy, was sitting in the largest arm-chair, apparently

meditating some new heaven-sent scheme for squeezing a fortune from a sceptical world. I see him beginning cautiously.

"You know, we can't go on for much longer like this, old girl. Of course, we shall be all right when my ship comes home. But can we afford to wait till then?"

"We can't live on air," I see my mother saying. "And if we could, the child certainly can't."

"Yes, there's the child too, poor mite. . . . You know, old lady, lots of men would say you were a real stunner."

"They have said it."

"When I go about the West End at night, seeing those girls made up to the eyebrows, not one of them worth wasting a look on and all of them coining money like an organ-grinder's monkey, I often wonder how they'd do if they had any real competition."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, what man would look at one of them, old girl, if he could look at you?"

But there I lose the thread. For me the step from promiscuity to prostitution was not such a big one. My mother's uncontrollable tongue had familiarized me with the idea of street-walking from an early age. I was one stage removed from the certain if dull security of the comfortable middle-class. But she had only strayed a comparatively little way along the path that leads away from safe conventionality. The abyss suddenly opened before her feet in the form of an open invitation must have seemed unfathomable. How many inconclusive conversations, how many less and less dis-

guised hints were necessary to persuade her to leap into it I cannot guess. But in the end her barriers, sapped from within by her own inertia and sense of separation from her own family, were broken down. And I can picture easily enough how the last of the discussions ended.

Tom would be almost gay. The struggle was over, and he and his day-dreams were comfortably provided for.

"Well, old lady," he would say, "that's fixed. All you need to do now is to go out and take a nice little flat in the West End. I'll look round and get some sort of little place in the country where I can get ahead with my lettuces: there's money in them as sure as eggs are eggs. I'll take the child with me, it'll be far better for her, and you shall come down and see us at week-ends and when you want a holiday. You'll make money hand over fist, don't you worry. And don't you think I'll ever forget how you've stood by me. You've been a little brick. I shan't deceive you, we'll pool all we make. And when my ship comes home, I'll pay you back for all you've ever done for me." And I imagine he went out and had a good drink on it.

My mother took a little flat in Clarges Street. How much her first night on the streets cost her I cannot pretend to guess. Soon she began to frequent the Empire promenade, the half crown one and the five-shilling one, where you had to dress. What failures she had were due to her lack of brazenness, what successes to the fact that she didn't look what she was. "You look like a district visitor, not a prostitute," her men would

tell her. Nearly all of them could ask in amazement how she came to be doing this, as they still ask me. She met painters, writers, politicians: there were dinners at the Monico and the Café Royal, nights at the Cecil and the Metropole, flowers and jewellery. She was still gentle and timid, she still hated coarseness and foul language. And all the time there was the constant drain of her makings to Tom and me in the country.

Tom was not in the least one's idea of a ponce. Little, if any, of the earnings he extracted from my mother went on drink or high living. Occasionally, when she visited us, he would tell her that he had got a cert this time, a horse that couldn't fail. "Some men in the know were telling me about it the other day," he would say wistfully. "If only I had a tenner to back it we should be in clover." Of course he got his tenner. But most of his beggings were for much more sober indulgences. He would ask for money to buy wire-netting for rabbit-hutches or chicken-runs, or huge quantities of some new kind of lettuce seed. Or perhaps he wanted to make the house a little more cosy. Because he was a house-proud man. He spent a great deal of his time in the kitchen, was an admirable cook and baked home-made bread into which he was for ever trying to introduce some new kind of flavour.

My mother had not been more than a few months on the streets before she met the man who was to be her second husband. He was a man named Stelling, home on leave from some never very well defined job in the Malay States. Stelling had been at Oxford and had a small private income. He was tall, with slender,

delicate hands: an automatic "dear" terminated his every sentence when he was speaking to my mother. I think he felt that there was something male missing in his character, and he had to clothe himself in poses, always quite refined and unobtrusive poses. At this time he was the man who has got the East into his blood: he slept in a sarong. He began by being very much in love with my mother: I doubt whether she felt for him much more than the affection one would feel towards a life-belt when one's ship has gone down in a stormy sea. Stelling and I always loathed each other. He usually referred to me as "That horrid little beast."

The main problem that confronted the newly engaged couple—the divorce with Jerry was pushed through easily enough—was what to do with Tom. "Get rid of him," my stepfather said, and that would have seemed the normal and natural solution. But Tom, whose capacity for tears was always generous, surpassed himself when my mother told him she was going to be married again. She could not bear to turn him loose into an unfriendly world after that. Stelling had already decided to take a house in the country, in Surrey. My mother persuaded him to give Tom £70 and to take him on too, to look after the garden and the poultry and dogs we were going to breed. The arrangement might have worked if it had not convinced Tom that he was safe for life. His emotional blackmail, he felt, had won him a soft job which nothing could lose; he could afford to lie in bed till lunch to the end of his days. He started to do so. The garden rapidly developed into a pampas of tall grass; the hens, first

one by one and then all together, began to escape through the daily widening gaps in the wire-netting. Eventually Tom was detected stealing eggs from a neighbouring miller and ran away to sea. He returned after some months' enforced celibacy and over-persuaded my mother into renewing their old relationship. My stepfather returned in the middle of this passage, and there was nearly a fight in the kitchen. I can hear the unseen voices rising, Stelling's more and more refined and cutting, Tom's more and more bold and blustering. It did not actually come to blows, because my stepfather discovered some dignified pose into which to retreat. And Tom passed with bowed shoulders down the drive out of my life, repeating in a loud mutter: "Filthy little tyke. For two pins I'd have knocked his block off."

Those Surrey days were happy ones for me. The world seemed a friendly place, except when my mother and my stepfather were quarrelling. I suppose I knew that my mother, who had never wanted me, didn't really love me. There was no constant undertone of affection about the house, the big people's love and anger seemed to turn on and off like a tap. I took refuge in solitude. It was a biggish house, with an orchard, stables and a paddock for the horses; a drive bordered by crocuses led up to the front door. My chief pleasures were companionship with animals and insects and the feel of the earth I trod on. I still know that it is more luxurious to go barefoot than shod, because only so do you feel the delightfully varying consistency of the ground over which you walk. I preferred wild things to tame, the sloes at the bottom of the paddock, the sour little crab-

apples that turned your tongue furry. Of the animals, my favourite was a clownish bulldog that was always making itself sick eating apples and getting stung by wasps. But I felt of them all as living in their own private worlds, with their particular ecstasies and miseries, to which my world was only a tangent. Had I known it then, I should have understood and echoed:

How do you know but every bird that cleaves
the airy way
Is an immense world of delight, closed by your
senses five ?

My parents' acquaintances were limited to three or four neighbouring households. Most formidable and disapproving of these neighbours was my mother's unmarried sister, Aunt Elizabeth. Aunt Elizabeth looked down her nose at my mother, not because she had been on the streets—for that secret had been kept jealously guarded from the family—but because she was a divorced woman. Her disapproval was, however, mingled with an ill-concealed curiosity about the horrid details of the life she professed to condemn. This curiosity grew keener and more shameless as the years increased my mother's vagaries, till Aunt Elizabeth's censures became but a formal prelude to an "I suppose, dear" designed to elicit "the worst" which she so thirsted vicariously to experience. None of my parents' Surrey friends had children, which made my introduction to my first school not only an icy plunge, but a plunge into an unintelligible kind of iciness.

The school, across a wide common from our house,

was kept by a Mr. and Mrs. Perks. A board outside proclaimed: Mr. Perks, Violin, Singing, Piano and Mandolin Taught. Mr. Perks rarely appeared to display his proficiency on the mandolin. He was a disappointed, skinny little man, with a walrus moustache, who might have been a parasite on his wife. She, swelling-busted, red-faced, with oily black hair piled up in tiers on her head like a cottage loaf, presided over the chilly and churlish room into which you were shown on your first morning. You were named to the other children lining the splintered desks or bent over the mossy inkwells: the room became a universal vacant gape. It came as a sudden, incomprehensible revelation that people could do things together, stand up together, say "Good morning, teacher" together, gabble the Lord's Prayer together. That school, and so many others of the train of depressing schools through which I was drawn, strikes me now as a kind of spiritual knife-grinder's shop, in which the aim of the knife-grinder, as he holds his blades in bunches over the whirring wheel, is to blunt and not to sharpen them.

Coming back in the evening over the common was a nightly terror. In the middle of it was a ruined cottage which had once been inhabited by two old maids. After living together for years, I was told, they had been seized by a fit of mutual loathing and pushed each other into the fire. I usually ran past that cottage, as if a shadow were reaching out from it to grasp me. Sometimes, indeed, in fits of perverse courage, I walked right up to the front door, for one is drawn to as well as repelled by what one fears. But there were not many

months of these dreaded walks. The War had come, and it was decided we should take a flat in London. While my mother and stepfather superintended the moving, I was boarded out with a miller and his two little sons who became my first child-friends. And then I left the shelter of the country for the city that was to be my fate. All I knew of it was that it was a place where there was a park, and that a band played in the park.

CHAPTER II

THE flat was one of a block in Battersea. There was a yard at the back with lilac bushes, privet hedges and the exposed entrails of the little wooden goods lift that ran up to the various floors. My stepfather, soon to depart for Palestine as a lorry-driver for the R.A.M.C., insisted that I ought to be packed off to a strict boarding school to have the nonsense knocked out of me, for though circumstances had made me solitary, I was wilful and headstrong. My mother replied that if I went I would only come back a horrid little snob. This was her most heartfelt term of abuse, for though she was now by no means outside the respectable world, she could not free herself from feeling the imagined wry looks of those who had never strayed from it. If my stepfather had gained his point, I might not be where I am to-day. As it was I went, eager for the adventure from which I had so far been cut off, to a succession of London day schools where the liveliest company was often the lowest.

With Stelling away, my mother and I became better friends. We went to the theatre together: I remember liking *The Blue Bird* and *The Immortal Hour*, though I never cared for pantomimes. She

laughed kindly enough at my period of religious emotion, when I used to sit quiet at a table for hours, covering pages of paper with crosses on which hung grotesque figures of Christ. But we were never so close together as during the air raids, when my mother used to get up at the first sound of the maroons and methodically get ahead with any ironing or darning that had been left undone about the flat, talking to me in a quiet voice through the open door. Sometimes the residents of the flats below would invite us down to share their safer shelter. They would stand or sit about consulting their watches every half-minute and talking with a feverish determination of anything but the War. To me an air raid came to mean simply a time when people became inexplicably friendly and loquacious.

It was not long before my mother had attached a new admirer to herself. He was a prison warder and she had got into conversation with him in the gallery of the Old Vic. Married to a delicate wife, he was fat, moustachioed, fond of oratorio and very conceited about his own tenor voice. At first the friendship was a purely intellectual one. John used to come up to our flat with volumes of Handel or Spohr and mother used to play his accompaniments on the piano. I remember how persistently he used to irritate her with his double r's in "He shall rule the nations with a rod of iron," an aria in which he particularly fancied himself. Then little by little I sensed the atmosphere changing. John began to blossom out into tiny presents. He would bring up a sixpenny bottle of cheap perfume—zenobia, I fancy—or a bag of vegetables from his garden. "I've

brought you half a pound of tomatoes, kiddy," he would greet my mother. "You know they're home-grown," the last phrase uttered as if the fact of their origin made them more precious than rubies. When he arrived I was no longer allowed to sit on in the drawing-room to hear him singing. I was sent out to pick flowers in the park or to buy a pennyworth of sweets and told not to hurry back. I was not eight years old at the time, so I could only notice the change, not understand it. My own feelings about men were limited to the fervent hope that they would never embrace me, because of their bristly chins.

I don't expect my mother originally intended to succumb to John's seductions. But her resistance was not made easier by the visits which an actress relation of hers, cousin Harriet, took to paying us at this time. Cousin Harriet was of a figure which Edwardian admirers used, I fancy, to call Junoesque. Her furs and her femininity overflowed the bounds of the deepest arm-chair she sat in. She was working with a repertory company, reciting Shakespeare to wounded soldiers, and she soon made our flat her favourite place for rehearsals. Long into the night she would go on reciting blank verse, interspersed with the exactest and fullest details of her latest love affairs. By persistent implication she drummed it into my mother that there were only two scenes of action in life worth considering, *she* thought: the stage and the bed. My mother's outlook was rarely more than an echo of the last dominant person she had met, but there must have been feelings of guilt and conflict behind her final yielding

to John. Because a month or two after she became his mistress, she went mad.

Just three weeks were needed to transform the mother I knew into somebody strange and different and almost terrifying. At first I only noticed that she was unable to sleep and had become very quiet. Before she was always chattering to me; it was impossible for her to keep her thoughts from tumbling into words. Now it seemed as if some irresistible internal magnet was drawing her eyes and her thoughts within. When she did talk it was at night and to herself, getting up from bed and shuffling irresolutely about the flat, as if hunting for something lost whose what as well as whose where was forgotten, keeping up a perpetual muttering monotone, as though afraid that someone big and powerful would overhear her should she raise her voice. Then she got it into her head that the plants and flowers, of which the rooms were full, had a hidden enmity to her. If she touched one, she thought, something would spring out at her. Very softly and methodically she set about conjuring their menace, tiptoeing about sprinkling household spice round the roots and the bulbs in all the pots. Then she was seized with a craving for noise. She would sit at the piano for minutes together and beat it with her fist. Had I understood what was happening, I might have been really frightened. As it was, I felt only puzzled and resentful. I wished I could shake her and tell her not to be so silly. The last night before she was taken away, my mother told me when I came back from school to take off my clothes and go and sit in the bath and I should turn into a fish.

She herself placed her mattress on the narrow window-ledge of her bedroom and sat on it with her legs dangling outside. Finally, clad only in her nightdress, she wandered down into the street. She broke a neighbour's window with her arm, and then she was taken in charge by the police.

I was woken up next morning when the baize-aproned caretaker, like a minor character in an early Wells novel, let himself in. With him was his wife, very kindly, distressed and helpless, keeping up a continuous shrill complaint: "Aoh! Well, I never. Aoh! Who'd 'a thought it? Aoh! The poor little mite now. Aoh!" The family whose window my mother had broken gave me breakfast, in a spirit of Christian curiosity. And then our respectable relatives began to descend. The next thing I remember is going down on the top of a tram with Aunt Elizabeth, bursting to ask me the questions she knew she could not, to a Streatham school kept by a distant cousin of my mother's.

The school was, I believe, a good one, but I did not enjoy it. I was very backward, and the eight boarders who lived in the hostel opposite the school building were all older than me. One girl of eighteen used to scream far into the night for her Daddy, who was at the War. My only friend was my cousin, Dick, who was of my age and was put into the same room with me. He broke the ice at once, asked me what I was going to be when I grew up, and talked about engines till we both fell asleep. From the older girls I met only bullying.

Aunt Elizabeth bought me clothes and wired to my

stepfather to come back, since his wife was irrecoverably insane. She also hung about the flat a good deal, hoping that her thirst for scandal as well as for self-importance would be gratified by some indiscreet caller. It was. Not a week after my mother had been placed in an asylum, John, the musical prison warder, rang at the flat door. An unfamiliar and imposing face asked him who he was. Respectability, he felt, was the cue, not brazenness.

"I'm Mrs. Stelling's brother," he replied.

"If you're Mrs. Stelling's brother, I must be your sister," answered Aunt Elizabeth, "a fact of which I wasn't aware." The uttering of the sentence must have held heaven for her, but she didn't let John go till she had wormed most of his story out of him. And when my stepfather landed she retailed it to him with much nodding of the head, drawing it out to as great a length as its slender skein would permit, caressing its surface with acid spinster diminutives. "Of course, while you've been away, Vincent, there's been a little incident. Edith hasn't been quite herself, naturally, but"

My stepfather, still in khaki, came down to the school and took me for a barren Sunday walk over Streatham Common. With him, too, I went down to the asylum. It had the blankly anonymous front of a building from which all humanity has been drained. Down its endless polished corridors shuffled an aimless tide of beings in carpet slippers, red flannel dresses with tucks in them, and coarse woollen stockings that never fitted. An occasional breakwater was a nurse with a

face as stiff as her starched cuffs and a bunch of jangling keys at her waist. The visiting-room was a shamefaced silence in which there rose above the threshold of hearing only the rustle of unwrapping paper round presents of fruit, the muttering of the patients and their visitors and an occasional burst of sobbing. The shadow of disgrace, one felt, prevented any voice from being lifted above a whisper within its shiny walls.

My mother was discharged after six months and immediately declined her cousin's offer to keep me on at the Streatham school, which I was beginning to like. She didn't want me to grow up into a little snob, she repeated, so my second chance of a normal life went by. Instead I was sent to a convent school near our home, where the most factual lessons seemed penetrated by a perpetual bloodless prayer, and a succession of board schools. There I was stoned, had my hair-ribbons pulled out, and heard my fellow-pupils shouting after me in the street: "Yah! The kid from the mansions!"

There was no reason why I should have been fobbed off like this, because we were as prosperous as we had ever been. Stelling was drawing £500 from one of those Government posts that were then blooming luxuriantly on every hand; he had his own private £300 a year and my mother's £150. My mother was singing in the Bach choir, I was having violin lessons and my stepfather was learning the clarinet. There were two violins in the flat, besides the clarinet and a piano. We kept a couple of pedigree Irish terriers, and my stepfather had bought a motor-bicycle and side-car in which he and my mother used generally to go away for the

week-ends. I, still "that horrid little beast" to him, was after a trial or two omitted from these excursions. I was left behind with the run of the flat and the streets, a store of food and much too much pocket-money to be good for me. The money attracted a rabble of my board-school acquaintances who had begun to recognize that I was, after all, a human being. I brought them upstairs, we would dress in my mother's clothes, make up, bang the piano and feast together on the floor long after we should have been in bed.

It was left to my stepfather, this time, to break up the household. He had been married six or seven years now and had begun to take out girl typists from his office. Sitting on Box Hill with my mother on one of their week-end trips he broke it to her that with one of these girls he had become more than friendly. He had gone punting with her on the river with bottles of port and Lyons's ice-cream bricks, and now she complained that she was in trouble. He didn't like Gertrude, she was a vulgar little beast and he felt her as a weight round his neck, but something must be done. Her face as yellow as a poultice, my mother came straight back and told me the whole story. I was then just eleven.

A period of confusion followed. My stepfather, though he said he disliked Gertrude, seemed unable to choose between his two women. At root, I think, he was one of those men for whom a woman's attraction is measured, like that of a loaf of bread, almost entirely by her age. Gertrude may have been tiresome, but she was only twenty-one. He brought her up to the flat

to show to my mother: she spent the night there. Himself he came and went like an uncertain lodger: one day resolved, with brutal masculinity, to drop the girl dead, the next determined to stand by the poor kid to the end, a third uneasily asking whether his marriage to my mother had panned out so well after all. In the end he took a flat at Clapham for Gertrude to have her baby, and my mother went and looked after her. A few weeks after, he finally left himself, taking half the furniture and renting a bungalow in Surrey for him and his mistress. My mother, though she was provided for, moped and made two rather unconvincing attempts to gas herself. Twice I returned home to find the front door bolted against me and a smell of gas issuing. Once I went for help to neighbours, who wound me up to the flat in the goods lift, and once to the police. On both occasions I found my mother, her suicidal fit already forgotten, cheerfully bustling about and making herself a cup of tea.

The most fateful of my acquaintances at school were a gaudy, down-at-heel family in a mean street round the corner. The father of the household, who was half a German, was a drunken watch-mender, good-looking in a waxen German kind of way, like a handsome meerschaum pipe. He was something of a pianist and very sentimental. His favourite subject of conversation was the death-beds of his wife and his mother. When he returned to this topic, an abstract, dreamy look would come into his eye and he would stare tearfully at the ceiling, puffing out clouds of tobacco smoke. "Yes," he would say, "there she lay, stretched out on the

bed like a china doll. For'er the troubles of lade old over. 'The Good Lord 'ad taken my wife to 'Inerci- The room was as 'ushed as a great cathedral. You could almost 'ear the angels singing."

The five children in the house were looked after, with many cuffs and oaths, by sixteen-year-old Alice, blowsy and bepainted, their eldest. Old Adolf would mildly protest as she bustled round the littered dining-table, distributing slaps impartially on every hand: "Don't 'it my little Winnie! Don't 'it my little Jessie!" She had learned to pay no attention to him, and a new howl of pain would rise from a fresh quarter of the room. Sometimes, still watery-eyed from his latest excursion to the pub, he would complain mildly of his bad luck. "These are 'ard times for a good man," he would say. "You see what this 'ouse is, all running to rack and ruin. It seems as if the world don't 'old no room for a conscientious workman. If only I 'ad a little bit of work now."

Adolf's lack of business was, of course, due almost entirely to his love of liquor. But it is easier for a child to see a misfortune than a fault in a grown-up, and besides, my upbringing had given me no very fixed moral standards. I went home to my mother night after night full of the woes of the family. It did not take long to touch her heart and soon she sent him a watch to mend. I don't remember that the watch was ever mended, but it was followed by a parcel of old clothes, to replace the gaps which the pawnshop had made in the household's wardrobe. Then Adolf came up to our flat to express his thanks. He sat down at

to show no—he was a good ear-player—and my mother self 'completely conquered. Finally the children, all five of them, came up, and the whole family established themselves as lodgers. And one night, returning late from the cinema, I saw a light under my mother's bedroom door and heard her voice and that of Adolf coming from within.

That was a shock. I was too old to be merely puzzled now. I was disgusted and ashamed as well. I had, I suppose, seen my mother's weaknesses before, though I don't know that I had called them that to myself. I had acquired, as many children with neurotic parents must, a sense of protectiveness towards her. Obscurely, with my sympathies, I could understand her capitulation to misery, even though I might not be able to formulate my understanding. I could see that, for some people, to grow up is only to become more poignantly a child. But this was not a capitulation to high and pitiless forces, it was a willing surrender to something personal, soiling and uncouth. I had hoped that my mother would be sorry for and like my protégés. When they had first come up and settled on us, it had held all the excitement of an impromptu party. When they showed no signs of going, I had begun to feel the tired fretfulness that a child does at a party that has gone on too long. For though I could be blind to the grimy haphazard of the watch-mender's household, I treasured the separateness of the two parts of my life, the return to the lighted orderliness of our own rooms, the clean Liberty chintzes and the fresh flowers. Now the tumbled conjunction of these two worlds had

been consecrated by a change of status that made old Adolf, to whom my mother was to have been the merciful descending angel, her Caliban-like master.

Still, there was a thrill in trailing round the London streets in the lengthening spring evenings with a gang of companions to whom no adventure seemed barred. There was little in what we did, knock-and-running, cheeking passers-by and policemen, but before us always beckoned a vague promise of unknown excitement. I can't be certain how it was that this formless thirst for novelty was directed at last into one definite channel, but I think it was Jessie who suggested that we should try our hand at shop-lifting from the local chain-store.

There were four of us in the gang, Jessie and her brother Jackie, Patsy, another neighbour's child, and myself. At first we were very modest in our depredations. It would be sufficient achievement to sidle, staring-eyed along a single counter and escape with one packet of sweets or tube of tooth-paste in an absent hand. Then our standards began to rise. To emerge with one article only was to be a coward. If you were to win acknowledgment for your prowess, you must confront the successive gaze of half a dozen separate assistants and outwit at least three of them. Should you fail to profit by their distracted attention on a first round, you must boldly start on a second and not give up till you had collected a haul of which you need not be ashamed. The game was only made worth while, of course, by its element of risk, but it never occurred to any of us that we could actually be caught. I don't

fancy it ever occurred to us either that our escapades entered into the categories of right and wrong. All our thefts were such purely useless ones: strings of beads, powderpuffs, little mirrors, cakes of soap, tooth-brushes, pipe-cleaners and tinsel brooches. It was the easier for me to forget that what I was doing was stealing because I soon found that I was far the most expert of the gang, and it is difficult to feel that an accomplishment at which one excels is wrong. I was, of course, much better dressed and excited less suspicion. Then I had large and innocent eyes capable of enduring the most hostile glare without flinching. I was pretty, too, and I knew it, and I had the comfortable middle-class assurance, which my companions lacked, that shop-assistants and that crowd of impersonal beings that assures the order of the world were inferiors of whom it was not necessary to be afraid. But above all I was quick with my hands and quick with my brain, and there was never a day when we went out together when my pickings weren't the largest of the gang.

My mother soon got to know what we were doing. It was impossible for her not to, when we gleefully disgorged the products of our raids on our return home. One would have thought that an older woman, without being too ponderously moral, might have foreseen and warned us that repeated escapades of this kind can have only one end: detection and disgrace. But with incredible light-headedness she treated our entire adventure as an immense lark. "Whatever will you be up to next?" she would exclaim. "Heavens! Sheila's got three powder-puffs now! She'll be able to start a shop

of her own soon." And old Adolf would grumble: "Artful as a waggon-load of monkeys, these kids."

It was at Wandsworth that I was finally caught out. It was the largest and brightest branch of the store in the district, and we had decided to carry out a full-scale raid on it. There was to be no snatch-and-go poltroonery; we were out to break all our previous records. We had been there, I suppose, as much as half an hour. I had slid seven or eight articles into my little bag and the assistants' eyes remained as cowlike and casual as ever. I felt triumphant, but the zest of the artist possessed me. I would go one better, I would make my haul up to a dozen. The girl at the toilet articles counter was serving a bunchy old lady in threadbare brown. I stretched out my hand quickly for a bottle of eau-de-Cologne. Almost simultaneously I felt a pair of eyes fixed on my back and a dry and heavy hand descend on my wrist. And as my heart jumped and the world stopped I heard a voice coarse with venom in my ears: "Got you this time. In the very act. Thieving little bitch!" It was the first time that anyone but my mother had ever sworn at me.

The others heard and bolted for the door. I was alone, and every eye in the shop seemed fixed on me. Time had changed down to a lower gear. Great gaps yawned between the interstices of its jerking seconds. The manageress, square-built, with malignant pale eyes and a face of flabby bitterness, was still gripping my wrist. Over my head she was telling one of the girls to go out for the police and look slippy about it. Through my mind from above thoughts, feelings,

observations were cascading down into a plumbless pit. The inconceivable had happened to me. It was as if I were in one of those childish nightmares where you turn the pages of a picture book, one of whose pictures is so horrible that to look on it is death—and that page had been turned. The girl at the next counter had a red and querulous nose: I wondered whether she drank as much as old Adolf. I felt very empty and cold, as if all my inside had been drained away. Something that didn't know me and didn't care about me had got hold of me. To it I was not a person, but just a thieving hand. I was cut adrift from all the feeble help and comfort I had to look to. I wanted to ask the time.

The policeman appeared, less terrible than I had feared. He was a plain-clothes detective with a ginger moustache, a leathery complexion and not unkindly eyes. The manageress started to repeat her description of me: he shut her up. "No need to use that language in front of a child," he said shortly. Together we walked silently through the crowded evening streets to Wandsworth police station. I think he told me not to worry too much, that nothing was ever as bad as all that. "Never been in trouble before? They'll let you off with a caution, I dessay," he said. Somebody large and blue was scratching with a pen in a large book at a high desk. They asked me my name, my mother's address. Very late at night she came to call for me, weeping and helpless. It might have been she who was charged and not I. They let me out on remand for a week. In the early hours of the morning we were rudging home together, both in tears, up the dark in-

cline of Lavender Hill.

I was to appear at Brixton juvenile court the following Saturday. The week passed slowly: I woke up every morning with a feeling of impending doom just over the edge of my mind. But I could not have guessed what was to happen on the fateful day. Fully dressed, ready to go out, easily able, in her gentler mood, to persuade the magistrates to release me on probation, my mother collapsed in a fit of sudden hysterics. She couldn't come with me, she couldn't face it. So it was with Alice, eldest of old Adolf's children, that I went down to answer for my theft.

It would have been impossible for my mother to have chosen a deputy more exactly fitted to impress the bench with the badness of my home surroundings. Alice, then aged sixteen, was a large and bloated girl of the type who goes out with the boys of the Heath and looks thirty by the time she is twenty-one. To her equals she spoke with a leaden pertness, to her reluctantly acknowledged superiors with a dull surliness. She was dressed that day in a cheap chequered costume with a large paste brooch at the neck. On her head was a wide-brimmed lace hat, tilted very much to one side, with a red rose on it. And her big blank face was almost lacquered with thicknesses of paint and powder. We waited uneasily side by side in the bare, polished ante-room, where wizened-faced mothers held the hands of despondent children and flat-footed welfare workers with unfurled umbrellas padded about in squeaky boots and high-necked blouses. My case was called; a distant voice asked where the parent was. Alice stood up in

her finery. Instantly the focussed pairs of eyes grew colder.

"You can't be that child's parent."

"Course not, but I'm lookin' arter 'er."

The remote heads bent together. There were a few whispered words. Looking round I saw the venomous manageress of the store, the ginger-moustached detective. The bad dream had reintegrated itself, but it must be on the point of ending. Then an impersonal accent spoke briefly:

"Remanded in custody for a week for the parent to appear."

I seemed to hear the sentence not with my ears but with the pit of my stomach. Even so I could not grasp it at first. Very slowly its meaning diffused itself through my body, to chilly arms and legs that had suddenly ceased to belong to me. It was too bad to be true. Never could I have believed that they would send me away. I forgot shame: the world was drowned in a passion of weeping. Somebody took me by the arm.

The Vauxhall Bridge Remand Home was the name of the place they sent me to. I cannot imagine a place which any child approaching normality would find nearer to hell. They began on your arrival by taking away your clothes and doling you out calico knickers large with the name of the institution, a calico petticoat, a striped cotton dress and cracking black shoes. You slept in a long dormitory divided into cells by wire-netting between the beds and above your head. When you went to bed you placed your day clothes in

a basket which you put outside the door. A few minutes later a matron with a pouter-pigeon bust, no lower lip and a battery of keys depending from her thick leather belt made her rounds, removed the baskets, and locked you in for the night. Meals were a dreary round of rasping brown tea, bread and scrape, watery stew and dark and soggy pudding. We spent much of our time scrubbing stone and polishing floors: lessons we had in a sooty "roof-garden" set amid a panorama of twirling chimney-pots. I was completely cut off from my own world, isolated in a vacuum of existence from whose void all affection, spontaneity and cheerfulness had long been exhausted. The only language its masters knew was words of command or reproof: its pervading atmosphere was the harsh institutional smell of unwilling cleanliness. Everything, to the very furniture, seemed to express a stern determination to be severely ugly. In my fellow-prisoners I was making contact for the first time with really nasty children. There were slit eyes, dribbling mouths, low foreheads, a universal air of underfed and resentful adhesion to a deformed and sunless life. Memories of the fragile happiness I had possessed less than a fortnight ago, now less recoverable than a lost prehistoric age, invaded my mind in gusts of anguish. I could not see what further abyss might not lie ahead. But I knew at last how weak were the forces, on which I had placed all my reliance, that were fighting for me. Those days in the remand home were the longest seven days of my life.

The time came for me to appear in court again. Police inquiries had not lightened the case against me.

It had come out, naturally, that my mother had been deserted by her husband and was living with a drunken widower and his five children. Our neighbours, all people with a servant and a nursemaid, had for long been complaining of the perpetual uproar from our flat. The brief evidence of my theft was given. Then my mother was called to explain her circumstances to the magistrates. Even now, I believe, had she been her gentler self, she might have persuaded them to grant me my freedom. But she was too bitterly conscious of her decline and their contempt to bear with questioning. She was too penetrated with the language of the gutter to resist its easy riposte. After a few exchanges her face became contorted. "You grouse-shooting old bastard!" she burst out at the chairman of the bench. Her voice broke in a gabbled train of sobbing, screaming abuse. They carried her out in hysterics.

And I, then thirteen and a half, stood alone to hear myself sentenced to two and a half years in an industrial school.

CHAPTER III

"Sit down, child. You can't see any more," an acid voice said.

The long platform had slid out of view, with the single wildly waving figure among the casual dozen. So long as I too stood and waved, the last slender thread of contact that held my mother and me together was unbroken. The voice snapped it. Even our parting was ordered into the past now. Voices like that would give me just such orders for years. I was helpless, in the hands of the impersonal. I drew in my head from the window and collapsed in my corner, my head in my hands, in tears.

Opposite me in the carriage sat a black-clad official female and the ginger-moustached detective. For them, probably, it was an outing to escort me to the industrial school. For me it was a journey, not through space, but through a timeless pain. I cried continuously and hopelessly from the moment I was bade sit down, and I knew that no one cared for my tears. Right up to the final sobbing embrace on the foot-board I had clung to the desperate faith that I was a special person, that nothing so bad as this could go on happening to me. That was torn away, and all that remained was an un-

bidden pulsing uprush of exiled memories, each a new twinge of torture. Less than three weeks ago I could not have believed in this. Through the chinks of my fingers filtered the same heartless spring sunlight, gradually fading into evening, in whose sanguine glow our random bicycle wheels had traced their adventurous circles of the South London streets. Unseen heavy figures got in or descended at a score of invisible halts; their market baskets were full of the same friendly humdrum packages with which I had run home to our flat twenty irrecoverable days ago. Bursts of conversation broke on my ears with the unheeded impact of the talk of watchers in a sick-room; then half a dozen words rose to hearing that might have been spoken at old Adolf's. Hiding within myself, my hands clenched in front of my eyes, I flung myself against my knowledge of the worst; I muttered again and again: "It's going on like this."

The place to which a fussy little dark green train was carrying me through the woods and meadows of Surrey was called Queen Charlotte's Homes for Children. It had been founded by a wealthy spinster whose aged figure, now completely blind and deaf, was occasionally pushed about its paths in a bath-chair on her rare visits. For all its spacious grounds, it had that forlorn air which always hangs about a country estate that has been turned into an institution. The wrought-iron gates of its front lodge looked out on a lane that branched off the main London-Reigate road. Beyond the gates, a gravel drive led up to the schoolhouse, facing across an oval lawn starred with flower-beds.

Round the lawn were clustered a circle of rough-cast cottages, all numbered, in which the girls lived. Farther off, down a palinged path, lay a larger residential house, holding sixty inmates, with a big sycamore tree in front of it. Disposed at varying distances about the school-house, within sight or screened by trees, were the chapel, laundry, kitchen-garden and playing-fields.

That is the description an observant visitor would give you of the school. But it was not what I saw the day of my arrival, in the tear-hazed twilight of an April evening, or for many days after. I was incapable of seeing. In my mind, whatever resolute quality it is that binds separate sounds and sights and smells together into a single reasonable world had broken down. I had passed, as if through the looking-glass, to the farther side of the incredible, and I was adrift in a hopeless inertia. My incurious senses recorded a housefront here, a clanging bell there, without making any connection between them but their common aura of distance and hostility. I do not remember the touch on my shoulder that must have bade me rise to get out of the carriage. I do not remember the drive to the school. I can only see the light on the edge of the table in a small room, crowded with brittle furniture, where my companions of the train were saying good-bye to me. The detective, who had cracked the awkward jokes I imagine warders do with a condemned man, was promising that he would go down and see my mother when he returned to London. I knew I was meant to listen, but I stared at him uncomprehendingly. I could not understand that I should not see her again. The

two turned and were gone into the night. My last link with the outside was broken. The click of a second's shutter had imprisoned me within the irrevocable.

The house to which I had been taken was the first on the right of the drive, the cottage of the superintendent. With a little cough the superintendent lifted herself above notice of my tears. A small gold cross winked on the bosom of her mauve silk dress as she uttered a few formal sentences of welcome. She spoke in a voice like a rich soup, and her tongue seemed to be caressing an impalpable plum in her mouth. I believe she said she hoped I should be happy and should behave like a sensible girl. She rang a bell and I was passed on to another impersonal hand. An anonymous attendant took me round the lawn and down the palinged path to the Sycamores to spend my first night's rest within the high walls.

Nearly everyone in the Sycamores was already in bed. But it was more with my feet and my ears than with my halfblinded eyes that I was conscious of the bare rooms, the empty, sounding corridors. Nightmare, I thought without caring, was playing a cat-and-mouse trick on me. It had softly withdrawn behind another interval of unconsciousness before pouncing out to reveal its full ugliness. The stocky, red-faced matron gave me a solitary supper at her table. She was an Irishwoman, of the insensitive kindness that can only express itself in unending breathless conversation. Over my head poured a stream of unheeded talk, bobbing with menacing and unfamiliar names like branches in a flooded torrent. Suddenly she realized

that I was crying, and her voice halted as abruptly as a stopwatch which the timekeeper presses. She bustled out with shrill cries to find the head girl, Sally, and ordered that I should spend the night in her room and not in a dormitory. Behind Sally's squat figure and bent-kneed walk I plodded up the uncarpeted stairs, chilly with the smell of yellow soap. In the darkness, its silence only broken by her heavy breathing and the creaking of the iron bedstead beneath me, I struggled to fight off the oblivion that was my last friend. Desperately I fought for a word of hope, a remembered picture of comfort, that I might carry with me into forgetfulness like a child's clutched and tattered doll. But the only phrase that rose in my mind, without help and endlessly repetitive, was: "Give us this day our daily bread."

I was woken at five o'clock, by a harshly clanging bell, to a world of novel and unfriendly bustle. In the clatter of hurrying feet on the stairs I was swept down like a drop of water in a heedless tide. Never, even at school, had I realized before that one is loneliest of all in a crowd. Round the basins in the splashed and steamy wash-room fought for positions girls with red circles round their arms, girls with bosoms bulging at the age of fourteen, girls who looked as if they had been brought up on Guinness from the cradle. I had not let myself realize that such girls existed outside the swiftly dispersed classroom silence or playground clamour of South London. They were my companions, I must learn their unknown language, conform, with a child's dread of a single slip from the accepted, to their

customs. Time, which they only won more drudgery by saving, pressed so hard on their heels now that they had no leisure to look at me as they splashed. But I wondered how long it would be before those cowl-like or malicious faces awakened to the knowledge that they resented my presence. As the rush spent itself and the smaller girls got to the basins I was given a towel and a number in the wash-room. I was dealt out with a pair of calico knickers, which, I was tonelessly instructed, the school called "linings," just as it referred to the lavatories as "offices." In the scrambling boot-room I was flung a pile of long, black, often cobbled boots, lacing almost to the knee, and told to find a pair that fitted me and look slippy about it. Finally I was given the school uniform, a brown, longsleeved cuffed frock, with buttons down the front, and ordered to go and mark my clothes.

Everything was scramble and rush and shouting; voices were perpetually on the verge of cracking into a scream. Sixty of us sat down with shuffling feet to breakfast at long trestle-tables, set in a large bare room whose figured red lino was its only touch of colour. There was dark and bitter tea, doorstep slices of bread-and-scraps. No one took the least notice of me till a plate of bread-and-dripping was sent down for me from the matron's table. Then there were only envious glances, comments that ricocheted over my head across the clattering cups.

"New girl's started greasing up to matron pretty quick."

"She looks a softy all right."

I could see the beginning of a long-armed clutch behind half a dozen fixed and greedy pairs of eyes. It was like a meal at old Adolf's ten times magnified, without that breath of grotesque humanity that alone made the watch-mender's household endurable.

I drifted out: to prayers, to another bawling meal, through a long afternoon, to bed. I wanted nothing but to be left to myself, and I was. I was the only girl of the whole two hundred who had a gentle accent, and for three weeks I scarcely stopped crying. The staff were as kind to me as they had it in them to be. For those three weeks they let me keep my own clothes. They left me outside the round of drudging duties and lessons that made up the life of the school. Little by little the dim days grew more solid, as in a slow coming-to from under an anæsthetic. People and places began to be present fixed outlines. I realized that, without noticing its growth, I had acquired a sort of shell. From within it I started to wonder how my companions had come to be at the home.

It was not difficult to discover. They were all maliciously eager to talk about each other. "See Alice, 'er with the red 'air," a weaselly voice informed me at table. "She's in for pinching from a shop, and so's Mabel and Rose. Susan, that girl with the big mouth, she tried to burn 'er mother's 'ouse down. Mary, 'er father did something to 'er and 'er sister, that's why they're 'ere. Vi'let's father used to strap 'er something cruel, so she was took away from 'er 'ome."

So the grimy catalogue dribbled on: thieving, in-

cendiarism, sex, parental brutality. Some of the girls were voluntary cases, sent because their mothers were unable to manage them. One or two were on the verge of imbecility or madness. There was Jane, who had been out with soldiers at the age of thirteen and had now developed religious mania. She never talked to anyone; when work was over she used to shuffle round the grounds with downcast eyes chanting to herself, "Jesus loves me, this I know" in a low drone. But there were other girls who ought never to have been inside at all, and they were probably the only children whom the school was incapable of harming. My first friend, Phyllis, was one of these. She was a circus trick-rider, who had ridden bareback in her father's touring company, and she had been sentenced for non-attendance at school. She was almost the only girl who was pretty without a hard mouth or suspicious eyes, and, probably because she had no sense of guilt, she was entirely unimpressed by the authorities. A few of the children, deserted or beaten by their parents, had been at the school, for others' faults, almost since their cradles. The prospect held out to them at the end of their term was the grey existence of a domestic servant, and all our training was designed to prepare us for this unhopeful career.

"You, Sheila Stelling, get into the school uniform and then take and iron these overalls." The head girl jerked her head. It was eight o'clock of a drizzling morning, three weeks after my arrival. I had become one of the crowd.

And so my hands and my body and the glancing

surface of my mind fell into the school routine. We rose, winter and summer, at five o'clock to the clanging of the bell and scrambled downstairs to wash. We scattered to our allotted house tasks, for all the cooking or cleaning in each house or cottage was done by the girls themselves. After breakfast the whole two hundred of us filed into the gymnasium for prayers, arranged by size in rows, with the teachers and matrons standing round the walls. The cracking of bones and the shuffling of feet as we knelt to pray often ended a period of sick early morning apprehension, because it was at prayers that announcements were always made. Rarely they might be pleasant: a social or a Girl Guide outing might have been arranged. But more often there would be an order of "Come out!" and some unhappy girl who had been caught hand-standing on the lawn or stealing Christmas puddings from the storehouse would be summoned from the ranks to stand alone beside the staff table while her crime was detailed. And sometimes there would be the dreaded news that some vanished delinquent, unfit to mix even with us, had been removed to the next lowest circle in our private hell, to a reformatory.

After prayers we broke up once more to go to the tasks or lessons which had been appointed for us by a schedule drawn up in each house at the beginning of term. The most sought after jobs were those in the garden, where we worked in the open air and under the supervision of men. The least popular work was in the laundry. It was a cramped wooden building, reached by a crazy flight of steps, and its air was always

thick with steam. We paddled about the uneven stone floor, perpetually running with water, in heavy clogs. Round the walls were rows of drying-rails; on the floor long ironing-tables, wooden tubs of misty blue water for scrubbing and cakes of slithery mottled soap. We all hated the matron who presided, from a high desk, over the washing. Her bespectacled face had the dull, malicious plainness of one who had been embittered against the whole world by her own lack of looks and who does her best to vent spite on anything weak that may be within her charge. As a child she had fallen from an apple tree while raiding an orchard, and been crippled for life. Now she walked with a crutch, and used it to lash out at us when she was annoyed. There was hardly a quarter of an hour we passed in the building—we were not supposed to talk at our work—that was not interrupted by her shrill "Stop yer 'ollerin'!"

Soap and water, blacklead and floor-polish were the great gods of the school. Not, I am sure, because the authorities felt that cleanliness was next to godliness, but because they thought of it as the sovereign antidote to idleness. All those two hundred children had to be kept occupied, to be preserved at all costs from thinking, and the only way to do it was to make unnecessary work. So one was given a piece of beeswax the size of a hazel-nut to polish the floor of a whole long dormitory. Every morning at half-past five the stone yard outside the Sycamores had to be scrubbed down with yellow soap. The matron's room was only used on four state occasions in each year, but it had to be cleaned out every morning. Some of the rooms,

indeed, were cleaned twice a day. The children's red and swollen hands were scarcely ever out of water; some of them became so chapped that great cracks appeared across the backs. Those who had gone there very young were turned into little old women, little domestic sluts, before they reached their teens. Only on four days of the whole year were we allowed for twenty-four hours together to straighten our backs—Old Girls' Day, Commemoration Day, Confirmation Day and Christmas.

We were supposed to be spurred into enthusiasm for our daily tasks by what was called a mark system. At the beginning of term we were each allotted a maximum possible number of marks. Matrons or mistresses could deduct marks for slackness or bad behaviour, and girls who arrived at the end of term with a certain percentage of their original total intact were given a small sum of mark money—pocket-money. On this prison system of rewards were grafted lifeless sprigs of encouragement clipped from the public school tradition. Someone had conceived the idea of stimulating our interests by arousing a pathetic pretence of "house patriotism." At the Sycamores it had been put about and wearily accepted that we were very proud of our glossy well-brushed hair. So there was daily hair-brush drill for five minutes in the house yard after washing, and I found myself put in charge of a resentful parade of the younger girls.

But much more important for our happiness than the most artfully designed bribes or threats were the personalities of the women who ran our lives. Almost

all of them gave the impression of having entered their career, not because they had any calling to it, but because every other calling had failed them. The most normal of the staff was the Sycamores matron. Except for occasional bursts of a temper you could usually laugh through, when she swore mildly and threw hair-brushes, she treated us with a friendly, imperceptive equality, deafened by her own babble of talk. The superintendent, on the other hand, was a great lady who by some cruel mischance had missed being great. Nervous, supercilious, hostess of the local clergy, she was defending a vanishing beauty with pots of mercolized wax at fifteen shillings each, scores of shoes, hats and dresses as her weapons. She was always being caught unawares by girls with her silky fair hair, which streamed down to her waist, undone. On such occasions she would affect an embarrassed cough and a small exclamation of annoyance at the intrusion. I don't suppose she ever realized that we knew these impromptu exhibitions were staged to show off her attractions. The superintendent habitually went to bed with three hot-water bottles; she was rarely down to prayers in the morning. She was said to be trying to forget the fiancé she had lost in the War. The matron to whose cottage I went from the Sycamores was another who had been disappointed in love. To us it seemed incredible that she could ever, within a historic age, even have conceived of herself as an object of desire. Her skin had turned to leather, thick dark down covered her upper lip, her voice had become a rasp and she had a habit of shaking her head continually while she talked.

She compensated for her disappointment by insistent demands for affection from us. Nothing was ever spoken, but one soon learned that the way to win her patronage was to call her "Mother." Two Jewish girls, whose parents kept a gambling den, were her favourites: they were willing to kiss her good-night every night. The third matron I went to was a friendly eccentric whose chief topics of conversation were spiritualism and the three still-born children she had buried. She used to stay up half the night praying and did her best to make us all vegetarians. When meat was sent down from the store for her cottage she would promptly put it in the dustbin. She claimed to see fairies and told us that if we became vegetarians we should be able to see them too. "Meat is carnal," she would say, "and you can only see the fairies if you live in your spirits. Blessed are the pure in heart, girls."

Quarrelling and resentment were the atmosphere we breathed the whole day through. There were quarrels at the breakfast table over one bit of bread that had more dripping on it than another; quarrels in the boot-room when one of the better pairs of boots, though all were heavy and painful, had been stolen from its temporary owner; quarrels over the matrons' favour; shrill cries of "Get off my floor, you dirty gipsy" when one unwittingly walked across a bit of boarding that some other girl was scrubbing. "Gipsy" was the accepted term of abuse; there was little bad language. And even the worst bullies betrayed a cringing timorousness of the consequences that might follow if they exercised their talents to the full. A tall olive-skinned

girl named Martha, who had helped her woodcutter father in his tree-felling before she came, knocked me unconscious and pulled out handfuls of my hair on a pretext that I can scarcely remember. But before the end of the day she was bribing me with a bar of chocolate not to tell the matron.

I came to live wholly in my imagination. The daily round was merely a routine that had to be endured with as little consciousness as possible. Something was bound to happen. My mother could not completely have deserted me. I was bound to get out somehow. My friend Phyllis felt as restless as I did. She wasn't dispirited; she was always singing. The school had cribbed her, but it hadn't humiliated her. Under a tree in the meadow beyond the Sycamores we plotted an ingenious joint escape. A small girl crept up behind us, overheard our conversation and reported it to the matron, and we were separated to different houses. Six months later, with another companion, I made a second attempt to get away. With half a dry seed-cake as our provisions, we trailed over five miles of fields and paths before hunger and the heat turned us back. Once more we relapsed into ticking off the days to our freedom, wondering with an anxiety which we vainly tried to hide from ourselves what was going to happen to us when we got out. Maybe we should fall into the pattern of that darkest nightmare which returns in a circle to the dreaded point from which it began. For in the school grounds stood one separate house, a "holiday home" for girls who had been released, secured a job

and lost it. It had one almost permanent occupant, a wispy-haired little hunchback who had been sent away and had returned again and again. Finally she was given a post on the inferior staff of the school, in the sewing-room. One day she did not appear at her work, and soon the whisper had run through every cottage that she was going to have a baby. Within forty-eight hours she had left, but what place of refuge was to shelter her returning feet now no one knew.

My mother did come down at last. I felt ill at ease as soon as I met her in the reception-room of the superintendent's cottage. I wanted understanding and consolation. She was bubbling over with a mystery of which she was obviously the heroine and which she found it impossible to conceal. She gave me repeated little winks and nudges as she told the superintendent she hoped I was settling down and would soon be quite happy. Immediately we were in the open she told me to make a dash for the front gates. She had sold all her jewellery, come down in a taxi and given the driver five pounds to snatch me away. While we were talking inside, however, the man had changed his mind. He had realized that it was a penal offence to abduct me from an institution to which I had been ordered by the courts. We turned a breathless corner into the main road to find him, dismounted from his car, obstinately resolved not to move. "It's more than my job's worth, lady," he repeated in a flat voice, in the intervals of my mother's storming and screaming. "I'm a respectable man with a family to keep." It was easy to see that his new decision was quite unshakable, but my mother's

voice only rose the higher. I fixed my eyes on the distant bend in the hot white road, with its little sparkles of flint, whose farther curve I should not see now. Once more I felt obscurely that I should be my mother's protector, not she mine; once more she had shown herself impotent against the world. Together we trailed miserably back up the lane, both in tears.

She came down again, but each visit was a new disturbance. Then her visits and even her letters began to thin out across the months. I learned that she had left old Adolf and was living on Canvey Island with a nineteen-year-old burglar. Chris, a tall, fair-haired former Borstal boy, was the son of a music-hall artist whom my mother had known in her early days on the stage. Dorothy was selling toilet-rolls from door to door and recognized my mother when she answered the flat bell. It only needed a few words about "my poor boy, nobody's ever understood him," to touch my mother's heart. Chris was deposited with her and they moved into the country, whose innocent air was to set him up again. Chris gave it to be understood that the one certain path to reform, for him, lay through his equipment as a tradesman, though I don't think he ever explained what goods he was to sell. My mother bought him a horse and cart, and when he tired of driving them, dashingly empty, about the Essex roads, he sold them both for drink. These limited funds exhausted, he stole and sold my mother's silver, forged her cheques and finally threatened to murder her because they were no longer met. She was not disheartened; she was only troubled by the thought that

Canvey Island might be becoming too hot to hold him. So she took him off to the Channel Islands. On their return to England he was arrested at Weymouth as a deserter from the Army, a chapter of his history which he had not revealed, and haled off to jail.

Visits were not the only break in the monotony of the school routine. Probably it was my misfortune that I wasn't interested in the games we played, net-ball and rounders. Possibly it was my fault that I couldn't fling myself with artless enthusiasm into Girl-Guiding, and found its whistle-blowing, training over windy commons, polishing buttons and disheartened choruses round laboriously constructed camp-fires a cheerless imitation of boyhood. I recovered my spirits more easily at the socials that were held at rare intervals in each year, with a Christmas tree at Christmas. Then alone we were allowed to put on our own clothes, wear hair-ribbons and bring out our few mean trinkets. The annual seaside holiday was merely a translation of our daily drudgery to less familiar and more irksome surroundings. Issued each with a canvas mattress and bolster, to be stuffed with straw, a knapsack for our clothes, an apple, an orange and a packet of biscuits, we were crammed into a special train for Weymouth. It was pleasant to look out of a lazy window at the flashing fields, the unbounded trees, the free, happy people, but it was a pleasure the hours had soon drained to nothing. When we arrived, we were quartered in a council school; our mattresses must be filled and laid on the floor for sleep, there was housework to be done and less conveniences for doing it. Our only picnics were

sandwich meals on the hot asphalt of the playground; our walks, straggling crocodiles through the August streets. We never bathed; the memories that stand out most clearly from those drooping weeks are the continual rows and the constant petty thieving.

It is easy, if one has a querulous outlook, to paint the darkest picture of the most tolerable surroundings. Possibly if I had been introspective I should have asked myself whether my unhappiness at the school wasn't merely due to my own origins. But I never needed to. My companions so plainly shared my feelings. The matron would sometimes burst out at the grumblers at the Sycamores with a jet of indignant common sense. "You're far better off here than in your own homes. You're well fed, your beds are clean, you've got games and fresh air. Not many of your mothers could look after you as you're looked after here." But she never got further without being interrupted by an outraged, defensive snarl of: "Don't you dare say anything against my mother!" At home, mother might be a slattern, father might be in jail, but at least the children were sometimes given a bag of toffee or a lump of cake. Maybe they got kicks as well at times, but at least there was feeling behind them, and even hard feeling is better than no feeling. At its very best, the attitude of the school authorities towards us was a brisk and resolute impersonality. Even if you couldn't define it to yourself, it was impossible not to feel obscurely that you were being treated as a little case or a little pest and not as a little girl. So the children resented the mildest rebuke from the superintendent or the head mistress far

more than they would a kick from a drunken father or a blow from a drunken mother. At home parents might be experienced as hateful tyrants; here, in a world drained dry of it, they were remembered as the one point of contact with fitful affection. And on their visits, in strange angular clothes that smelt often enough of the pawnbroker's mothballs, they became gods. Whatever else they did, they wept over their children. Half a dozen of the younger girls in the school had elder sisters there too. They were probably the happiest children of the whole two hundred. Whenever they were in trouble, it was never to the matron, always to their elder sister that they would run for protection. The worst scold in the place, blowsy, coarse, loud-mouthed, ready at any time to torture a smaller child to tears or to look on while another was playing the torturer, would fight one to three rather than allow her own sister to be bullied.

On Sundays, summoned by the tolling of a thin, methodistical bell, we went to service in the school chapel. The staff's pews rose in four tiers at the back, so that they might overlook our behaviour. We sat in long rows of chairs, screwed to the floor so that we could not tilt or scrape them. The choir, which I soon joined, wore red and blue charity school capes edged with braid. Sometimes the service was taken by the vicar of the neighbouring village, whose pallid face, weak mouth and prominent nose suggested an owl that had been confined in an underground aviary. He entered with flying surplice, invariably late, and gabbled through prayers and responses at such a pace that we

could never keep up with him. More often it was his curate, tall and lean, with the lined face of a disappointed don and a quiff of iron-grey hair jutting over his forehead like a tattered sail. The curate suffered from a perpetual sniff, and would interpose one between each clause of the Lord's Prayer. He revenged himself for not having a university congregation before him by preaching to us the sermons he would have done to them. But occasionally the place of vicar and curate was taken by a person on whom we all doted. Mr. Sumpster was a London solicitor who lived about four miles off and had become a licensed lay-reader. It wasn't only that he pedalled over to our chapel on his bicycle for nothing. He came to all our socials, where he was surrounded by a circle of girls pulling his sleeves; in December he conjured up a white wig and a woolly beard, a red robe and a large sack, and acted Father Christmas at his own expense. He was, I suppose, fifty years old, but the lines on his face were the wrinkles of someone whom age has not soured but ripened. Sometimes in summer a party of us were invited over to tea in his rose-garden, and he would cut a rose for each of us before we left. There might easily have been a touch of archness about his attentions, but there wasn't. It would have been quite pardonable if he had patronized us, though we should have known it: children soon learn to tell patronage from friendship. But Mr. Sumpster was purely friendly. He made us each feel, individually, what we had long grown to fear impossible, that real people in the outside world might like us. We thought of him, all of us, as a sort

of spiritual husband.

It was only patronage that the Visiting Board gave us on their infrequent descents. We were mustered in the gymnasium to sing "Rock of Ages" and the National Anthem before them. A nervous fur coat would venture close enough to us to ask whether we were happy. We knew the right answer and chorused "Yes." Then we were rewarded with oranges and apples, and the fine ladies and gentlemen would straggle away with the head mistress and the superintendent, fragments of serious conversation—"... Of course, the children ... " drifting back over their shoulders.

It was only patronage we got from the vicar and his wellfed God. In the lengthening spring afternoons we sat in a shuffling classroom, stolidly sucking bull's-eyes and furtively whispering smut while he pattered through an arid half-hour's confirmation class. "My duty t'wards myneighbours'tloveim 'smyself, 'nt'do untoim allthings 'sIwould'e shdounto me. What does that mean, children?" What did it mean? "Did you feel the Holy Ghost creeping down your back when the Bishop laid his hands on you?" my then matron, the spiritualist, asked excitedly when we slid into our seats round the tea-table after the service. "No, I felt nothing," I told her. "Ah, you're a lost soul," she sighed.

I think the Holy Ghost was with some of us quite a lot at odd, unexpected moments. But you can't call him down from heaven by pressing a button or muttering a formula. I may have felt him sometimes in the garden, weeding, trimming the spiked edge of the lawn,

realizing with a sudden shock how much the polyanthus had sprung up since yesterday. But he certainly was not with us that day, just before the confirmation, and never visited on us because it was only discovered during the ceremony, when we trespassed into the superintendent's office and broke open the black tin box which held all that officialdom troubled to know about us. Craning over each other's shoulders the half-dozen of us scrambled to disinter the folded sheets of blue Home Office paper that condensed our past. "Sheila Stelling," at last it read, "larceny. Vera H., incendiarism. Peggy, J., home dirty and immoral," here a parent drunk, there a head lousy. We had not known we could be summed up in so few lines. Mischief in a moment was soured into indignation and hatred.

• The school changed for me in my last year. It began, I think, when the spiritualistic matron was away ill, and we were left temporarily without anyone to look after us. The other girls in the cottage persuaded me to dress up in her wardrobe. They meant it as a prank. I saw it as an opportunity. I had always dreamed of acting and never had a chance to live my dreams. Choosing an assortment of obscure and billowing clothes, I swept into the room as Queen Elizabeth and then transformed myself into Sir Walter Raleigh. I had expected laughter: I was amazed to find myself greeted, first by a hush and then by a cackle of excited applause. I changed in one night from a unit into a person. Then a new head mistress arrived. Miss Tooting was tall and slim. She had long white

hands and a cool voice that never chilled because it was always waking into enthusiasm. From her behaviour it almost seemed as if she might like being among us, and it was quite clear that she was eager to discover new ways of making our life happy. Lessons began to be, even for the slow-witted, hours to be looked forward to rather than endured. Miss Tooting introduced handicraft classes: she produced morality plays. We realized, what no one had ever had the opportunity of noticing before, that we were not one dead level of dull capability, differentiated only by goodness and naughtiness. There was talent among us. One girl, with the inspired plain face of a Flora Robson, revealed herself as a triumphant actress. I found myself recognized outside the circle of my cottage and my acquaintances. Then, at a choir practice, there broke out a meaningless quarrel of the kind we were all well accustomed to. An older girl, maybe because she had been used to impersonality so long that she had learned to despise affection, tried to hit Miss Tooting. I stopped her. A week later there came a surprise that I had never even romanced to myself about. I was chosen captain of the school.

The duties were not many. Before certain classes I went down and helped Miss Tooting get her material together, and once a month I wrote up the log of the school. But I saw a great deal more of her and I began to win back long-sapped confidence when I found she was fond of me. There were disappointments in the months that slipped away. With half a dozen other girls I sat for a scholarship at a London secondary

school: only my mathematics lost me it. I must be content with whatever humble and unskilled job could be found for me in town. But though I was dizzy with the thought of freedom about to be regained, there was less of unspeakable relief that day I was summoned to the sewing-room to be fitted with the clothes in which I was to go up to London once more: a blue frock with buttons down the front, a brown jumper and skirt, a brown hat, thin brown woollen stockings and a brown coat with a scrap of rabbit-fur round the collar.

CHAPTER IV

THE job was a pound-a-week filing-clerk's post in a big firm of Regent Street tailors: my new home—it had been a condition of my sentence that I should not live with my mother till I was eighteen—was a Y.W.C.A. hostel in Maida Vale. I was left there by a matron nearly as excited as I was about the trip to town, with the assurance that she knew I should do my best to be a credit to the school. But already, only half a day behind though it was, the school was almost forgotten. I was intoxicated by the thought of my freedom and of the pound a week that proved I was worth something to the world. I could hardly stop myself hailing unknown faces in the hostel corridors, passers-by in the street, and telling them joyously: "I'm earning a pound a week."

The filing-room looked down on Regent Street from the fifth floor. One wall was like the face of a beehive, with pigeon-holes running up to the ceiling filled with dusty buff-coloured folders of dead orders and forgotten correspondence. It was presided over by breathless Miss Larch, who had been in the business twenty years and resembled an elderly and benevolent parrot. Every morning at nine o'clock she would fuss

in, with shapeless umbrella and bulging bag, always out of breath and flapping her arms like a bird's wings. "Open the windows, for mercy's sake" was her invariable greeting, and then she would settle down to spurring on our laziness and recounting to us once more how she had started at the bottom of the ladder and worked her way up to the position she now held. "If you're clever little girls and work hard you may be where I am some day," she would say. We liked Miss Larch, but it hardly seemed worth while.

The first pile of cards I was given to file I made a mess of, and many others. Miss Larch, who was incapable of making a remark once only, repeated to me with severe kindness that I had no powers of concentration. It was quite true, but there was such a cloud of other things to think of. There was the adventure of being sent down with folders to other departments, the packing-rooms, counting-house, fitting-rooms and show-rooms, and wondering with tuppenny novelette eagerness who we might meet on our dawdling way. Perhaps one of the rarely encountered customers might decide, on three minutes' sight, that one of us was the only woman in the world for him. There were the generally pimply young men who kissed us on hurried staircases or in dark corridors and over whose attentions we quarrelled fiercely while eating the sandwiches we had brought in for lunch. There were romances outside the walls, clasped hands in cinemas, three-penny bunches of violets. There was all the unbounded future.

At the hostel I was the youngest inmate and became a household pet. My companions were a strange assort-

ment of middle-aged, unsuccessful spinsters, for whom the place was a retreat from the world, and eager young students or workers like myself who regarded it as a stepping-stone. The first friend who attached herself to me was a red-haired Jewess named Ethel, who worked in a draper's and was always talking about babies. I shared my room with one of the failures, mild Miss Blake, who had been a schoolmistress, played the piano and had epileptic fits, most often in the middle of the night. Miss Griffiths, a bony-nosed Welsh-woman who slept next door, would shudder and stop her ears when the fits came on, but she had not yet capitulated to life. She was training, at the age of forty, to be a hairdresser and pursued me about the corridors with a pair of curling-tongs to get practice on my hair. Joan Benedict, one of the R.A.D.A. students who escaped the hostel rule of in by ten, recited to us in the sitting-room where we spent our evenings, and talked excitedly of the Shaw heroines she hoped to play. Miss Osborn, a middle-aged Scotswoman who had been a lady help with an English family in the Argentine, looked back with homesickness to the free air of the pampas. She was perpetually beginning stories that trespassed on the edge of the improper and stopping herself half-way with an abrupt "Not before the girls." The hostel superintendent, Miss Crowther, told me she looked on me as her daughter, and took me to the first play I had seen since my release, a matinée of *Man and Superman*. We talked over that for days in the sitting-room.

I went down to see my mother, who was back at Canvey Island, but it wasn't a success. The kind of

disordered existence she was living was one that must be shared if it is to be accepted. To me, as a casual visitor, it was merely frightening. She was either on the point of being involved with some new man or still crying over the last who had left her. She swore at me, and I found myself, though she neither understood nor believed it, hurt and ashamed. I felt resentfully that I had a right to expect that the atmosphere of my home would be different from that of the school. "Mother, your language is shocking," I told her. She called me a little prig.

So after I had been a few months at the hostel I thought I would turn for friendship to the respectable side of my mother's family, from which we had been so long exiled. Hardly daring to wait for the call to be answered, I rang up Mrs. Lake, the owner of the South Lôn don boarding-school where I had gone long ago when my mother was in the asylum. I could scarcely believe it when I realized that there was as much welcome as there was surprise in her voice. She asked me to tea at once, and I went, trembling, to her flat near Victoria, full of little occasional tables, brass ornaments, photographs of her pupils, and her own water-colours of the Alps. It was rather a frightening drawing-room to be shown into if you were nervous, for you could hardly stir a step without peril of knocking something down. And Mrs. Lake was a rather frightening person. She wore a quantity of skirts which kept up a perpetual mysterious rustling. She looked you straight in the face with a masculine stare that even the blameless must have found discomposing. She had been given the

O.B.E. for her services in the War and she talked with a slight lisp. But she had a kindly manner, and that first meeting she invited me to come down for a week-end to her country cottage in the little car she had taught herself to drive at the age of sixty.

The cottage was not far from Frensham Ponds, and the week-end began a new life for me. It didn't usurp the old; it ran side by side with it. Five and a half days a week I was a shopgirl, working among shopgirls and returning to a shopgirl's lodgings. The other day and a half I was a guest at country houses where even jobs were assumed to be a leisurely intellectual exercise and my own work was treated as a mild joke. For my visit to the cottage was the first of a succession on which I met other families who became my hosts. There was my Aunt Elizabeth, who remarked patronizingly that I had turned out very well, "considering everything." "She speaks quite nicely, Nesta," Aunt Elizabeth commented to Mrs. Lake, "and she seems to wash her neck, too." There were the Ingrams, Mr. Ingram an artist friend of my stepfather's who wrote nonsense verses and whose etchings were a mixture of fairy-tale and nightmare. Last, and most important in my life, were the Browns.

Mrs. Brown had been, in the distant past, a school-friend of my mother's, perhaps her only real friend. She had married a horse-faced colonial civil servant, now retired, who read the *Manchester Guardian* and the *New Statesman* and was for ever travelling to Geneva on some errand of international charity. The atmosphere of their home was a kind of earnest high spirits.

Mrs. Brown, petite and precise, wore her corn-coloured hair in a coil round her head. It was crowned by a hat that was always expensive but never sat on as it was meant to. Her straight nose was the embodiment of principle and she looked out on her competent little world through innocent china-blue eyes. The Browns had a big house, with a couple of ponies, three indoor servants, a groom, a gardener and a boy. Their children, named after Shakespeare characters, were dressed in pastel shades of green and rust that might have been grown as a protective colouring to blend with the changing seasons. Mrs. Brown would have liked to have drawn me too into the household colour scheme. "D'you know, child, I've never used powder in my life," she told me more than once in her piping voice when I arrived on a Saturday afternoon from London with a mouth that was coloured with my first lipstick, heels that were a little higher than flat and clothes that weren't as mouselike as the country demanded. Maybe she never tried to understand how two and a half years of brown uniforms and black laced boots had given me a thirst for gaudy materials and flashy garments. But she did her best to treat me as an adopted daughter. She and her husband evolved plan after plan for settling my future. At one time I was to be sent to a finishing-school, then I was to be trained for the stage, but only finally, when my heels had reached their highest and my clothes their gaudiest, did the Browns announce their project of shipping me off to the Colonies.

Under this constant scheming for my good I re-

mained silent and submissive, for little ever came of the talk and the country week-ends were the happiest days I had yet known. More than half the time I spent in the open air, riding, walking, paper-chasing. Indoors there were charades, shelves full of books and round games played with paper, pencils and a strong flavour of literature. But I was always conscious of an under-current of anxiety running just beneath the smooth surface of the hours. My hostesses never missed an opportunity of casting up my mother's past at me. Perhaps I would cry out, so spontaneously that I did not even know whether I meant it, what a pity it was she could not be with us some endless June day. Mrs. Brown would interpose: "I think it's just as well, child. You'd only fight." Aunt Elizabeth would seize the glittering occasion to pump me once more about how many men my mother had had. "Poor Edith," she would exhale a windy sympathy, "she's had a hard time. But then she's been so dreadful. One couldn't possibly invite her down here." I answered with blind yeses and noes, trying to hide within myself till the catechism should cease, held to my mother by a loyalty that couldn't escape being mixed with contempt. Did they despise me too, I wondered, for my two years at the industrial school. Mrs. Brown was the sort of person who professes a complete tolerance till the moment she is confronted with an occasion to display it. Did she know, I asked myself at such moments, that I had been sent to the school for shoplifting, and would she still allow me to go about with her children if she did?

But anxiety was almost forgotten in the quiet warmth of my first love-affair, innocent and happy. I was going for a call with Aunt Elizabeth when she stopped outside a fifteenth-century half-timbered house and cried over the garden wall. The house belonged to another family of my cousins, and it was Alec, their elder son, who answered the call. Clearer to me than any tangible picture is the image of him as he stood for a moment framed, fair-haired and smiling, in the door of the summer-house studio which he and his brother shared. He wore an open-necked tennis shirt, an open book dangled from one careless hand. Had his face been more intent you would have compared it at once with the famous portrait of Rupert Brooke. He hailed my aunt in a voice of nonchalant gaiety, and his eyes wandered with interest to me. I had never seen a young man like him before. We knew at once, without saying a word, that we liked each other.

After that first meeting, I was in and out of the house continually. Alec, who was lame in one leg from an accident he had suffered as a boy, was at Cambridge. His lameness only made him more romantic to me. On the walls of the studio hung pairs of oars belonging to his brother, and unframed charcoal sketches precariously held by drawing-pins: the furniture consisted of a large settee, a writing-desk and an easel, for both the brothers wrote poetry and painted. The papers on the desk were kept in place by a long-tubed hookah, its bowl filled with rose-water, and one corner of the room was fitted up, with lamps and a porcelain image, as a miniature Buddhist shrine. Alec

called himself a Buddhist; he lent me *The Light of Asia* and other Buddhist books; he talked far into the evening of the wheel of rebirth, the glory of complete renunciation and the noble Eightfold Path. "One can't get round it," he said. "Humanity calls for a creed of love. Christianity asks one to pay for it with the sacrifice of one's reason. Buddhism demands no entrance fee. It points to the truth and asks one to find the flaw. And there isn't a flaw." Maybe to-day I should regard Alec's Buddhism—I suppose he has outgrown it long ago—as an irritating pose; probably I understood only half of what he said. But however little I grasped, Buddhism was a corner of the world that we had to ourselves: a shared and secret language that I could take refuge in both from the occasional rubs of everyday and the plenty of soap-and-no-nonsense consolations of Christianity. There were the stories that came out of a distant fairyland which had never been tainted with tinsel: the three rides that revealed all the sorrows of mankind, the midnight flight from the palace, its fountains plashing in the starlight, the final achievement of perfection under the vast shade of the Bo tree. And in the end it was enough that it interested Alec to talk to me and that his talk and my listening were a way of being close together.

He talked well and with an affectation of manner that was only another attraction. He rarely used the word "I," it was always "one thinks," "one does," in a drawling voice that tried to hide its enthusiasms behind a pretence of disinterestedness. Of course I imitated him, and the girls in the filing-room found it the best

joke for weeks when they first heard me say "One feels" But I couldn't be laughed out of using his phrases: laughter made me persist in them more obstinately. Looking back on it to-day, I sometimes ask myself what Alec got out of our relationship. Then, there was no need for self-questioning, the immediacy of feeling between us admitted of none. I should still like to think that in those first few months he hadn't questioned himself either, that he hadn't consciously reflected that a very young and very pretty girl, who listens to you as if you were a god, is a possession worth cultivating. For he didn't forget me when he went back to Cambridge—I never feared he would. Long letters, ten pages long, used to come for me every week: I generally found them on the dining-room mantelpiece of the hostel when I came down on Tuesday mornings. The week didn't begin for me till Tuesday; when I saw the square envelope and the neat blue writing—could any other hand-writing, even, be as exciting as his?—it was as if the whole world had been created anew. At odd intervals through the next seven days I would take the letter covertly out of my bag, and go through it again, tasting once more the happy surprise of some phrase that seemed warmer than friendship, trying not to halt at it too often lest its glow should fade. An outsider might have found it ten pages of priggishness; there was little, openly, of the lover in what Alec wrote. But there was a feeling that suffused the whole, that escaped the words, that didn't need to be defined with darlings, and that made me wonder whether he could give as much of himself to anyone as he did

to me.

The first time he kissed me I was so surprised that I bolted over the garden wall. And even after, we didn't kiss often. It wasn't that I was cold or he was shy. Ours was the innocent age of love that doesn't need to make love. But I began to think of marriage, of living with Alec in a country house with two or three children. I didn't feel I was romancing. I was merely dreaming lazily of a future happiness that was no less fixed because it was distant, as a child dreams of its coming seaside holiday. And then one night after supper Aunt Elizabeth said she wanted to speak to me seriously.

"You're making a fool of yourself over Alec," she began abruptly. "You may not know it, but he's engaged already, to a very nice girl. It's true Joan's four years older than him, but we all think it very suitable. She's a serious girl, a doctor's daughter, and he wants somebody quiet. So you'd better put all that foolish nonsense out of your head—at your age too, not seventeen—and see a good deal less of him. I don't say it's been all your fault; I think it was very wrong of him to have trifled with your feelings. Perhaps if he were able to play games he wouldn't have behaved as he has"

I fled from the dim dining-room without a word, and down the road. Within five minutes its friendly buildings, which had shared my homeward-bound happiness, had become distant and malicious onlookers at my misery. Alec was alone in the garden. I called him a cad, I told him I never wanted to see him again.

Suddenly, from a being wise and beloved and almost impossibly close he changed to something callow and shamefaced and full of unconvinced excuses. He asked me if I didn't believe a man could be in love with two women at once; he said he could be equally happy with either of us. It was clever talk, but I knew at last that it was mere word-spinning. His laugh, the gay laugh which I had hoarded in my memory, had become the party laugh of an ordinary young man who wants to get out of an awkward situation. It had been a treasure we shared, now it was a weapon to hold me at arm's-length. And I, who had fancied myself a lover, was just an embarrassment.

Maybe if I had fought for Alec I should have won. But it never even occurred to me to fight. The bare announcement that I had a rival I had accepted as meaning that I was already defeated. There wasn't enough confidence in me to react, for a bare moment, against my aunt's patronizing assessment of our merits: Joan, a nice girl; I, a mere ridiculous child. Joan had the prestige of a grown-up woman, and nothing in my experience had ever taught me that it was possible to challenge prestige. For at the back of my mind was always the thought that I was the tainted, industrial school child whose business it was, not to fight for my rights, but to make the most acceptable possible excuse for my existence.

Of course, that quarrel in the garden wasn't the end of my seeing Alec. I couldn't do without him; I drifted back to the house. Once more we went about together, but there was something cracked about the

friendship. It meant that he became more of an insistent lover and less of a companion, and that I, in that London life which had become a mere scraps from the week-ends' table, resigned myself with less and less resistance to the pressures upon me. For men had begun to pursue me. They tried to kiss me in shops, they stared at me in tubes and buses, they followed me home to the door of the hostel. It was a furtive pursuit, there was a sidelong look in their eyes that made me almost ashamed of being beautiful; good looks, seen through their shabby designs, had acquired a taint of uncleanness. There was the little man who offered me a share of his umbrella on the open top of a bus one Sunday night when I was returning home from Liverpool Street after a visit to my mother at Canvey Island. It was a cold night; he suggested that we should get off and have a coffee together at a Lyons'. I was filled with a vast neutrality; there was no reason why I shouldn't agree. Over the clattering marble table he asked me where I lived. "Let's go back in a taxi, then," he said, when he heard it wasn't too far. He may have thought that the very invitation had a touch of rakishness and that my smile meant acquiescence in it. But I had never learned to distrust men, and if I had there was not enough emotion left in me even to feel distrust. As soon as the lights of Oxford Street were left behind, he grabbed me to him and began to claw at my clothes. I was disgusted and frightened; I fought, I cried. But my past had drained me too completely of the sense of my own value to permit me instinctively to slap him in the face. When he climbed

out of the cab and began a halting apology, I listened politely as if he were only expressing his regret for an accidental oath. "I didn't know you were a nice sort of girl," he concluded. Swallowing the insult, I mounted the steps to the hostel door.

There was the clerk who spoke to me in Hyde Park when I had gone there, on a bright spring Sunday, to listen to the speakers. He seemed safe. He was about thirty-five, a bull-dog pipe projected permanently from one corner of his mouth. He wore an expression of mild boredom at the opposite pole from the restless eagerness of the counter-jumper out for seduction. He asked me to meet him and suggested Richmond Park as the meeting-place. As we tramped across the grass he was seized by a throaty silence; at last he jerked out the suggestion that we should sit down under a tree, and I, though I wanted to go on walking, agreed. Sidling an arm over my shoulders, he burst into a dingy cataract of speech. He was unhappy at home, his wife didn't understand him; he had always been unlucky, he had been paying for the last two years for a child that wasn't his. He had been accused of taking a girl to Hyde Park on a February evening and assaulting her in the snow, and though it was completely untrue, he hadn't been able to break her evidence. Suddenly he pulled me towards him and started to scrabble at my body. I didn't cry this time. I sat up straight and told him I didn't love him, I didn't like him, I was a virgin. "There isn't such a thing as a virgin," he muttered with shop-soiled bitterness as he rose, dusting his trousers. It seemed such a mean use

to put the spring sunlight to, I thought, as we mutely retraced the three miles of turf to the gates. And we left the open for the shadows of a drab tea-shop, and drank a silent cup of dark tea at one of the half-dozen stained marble tables beyond the crowded counter, with its round glass jars of stale coloured sweets and its stands of drying ham rolls. And he put me on a bus and tipped his hat awkwardly and was gone.

There were others, but they were all alike. Some were more persistent, and flattered themselves they might win me by friendliness when violence had failed; none of them tried friendliness first. The clerk with the bulldog pipe was persistent, he invited me to his house to meet his wife. I wonder whether she can have been acute enough to guess that I should have found it far less embarrassing if she had not greeted me quite so warmly. She was small, with a fair fringe and an artificial delicacy, like a second-rate variety artist, and she showed no surprise at seeing her husband bringing home a seventeen-year-old girl pick-up. "We each have our own friends," she told me smilingly. It was a tawdry house, with imitation leather arm-chairs bought on the hire-purchase system and passe-partout framed Kirchner bathing beauties on the walls, and that was my last visit. After every incident I swore I would never lay myself open again, and then one more chance acquaintance led me up the path of friendly raillery to the inevitable attempt. I was lonely, I wanted to talk to people. Why couldn't they be content to talk to me? I asked despairingly. I never made the first overtures to them, I never wanted to. I was aloof and

distant. And then my high spirits would get the better of my timidity and another predatory man would confidently construe the laughter in my eyes as the light of willingness.

I hadn't kept my job with the Regent Street firm. One morning I was summoned down with another girl to the manager's office. After a fluent preface about the state of trade he began to halt. He was very satisfied with our work, we mustn't think that he had anything against our behaviour or efficiency, but the firm was cutting down staff. We should have to go, and if we would see the cashier he would give us a week's pay in lieu of notice. It had been our first post for both of us, and our dismissal seemed like the end of the world. The solid ground had opened at our feet to reveal the vast waiting pit of insecurity beneath, and we wept. We need not have done. Pound-a-week jobs for unskilled girls were easy to find then. Within a week I was in employment again, in a Bond Street tailor's. My duties were to stick the labels on the packages as the typist tapped them, to take out the parcels, to buy the stamps and to keep the stamp-book. Sufficient diligence at licking labels, it was understood, would secure eventual promotion from the packing-room to the office, and in preparation for this I started going to a night-school. The packing-room girls were no older than those in Regent Street, but they had come from a different kind of home. There was a perpetual undercurrent of smutty talk, of tattered French magazines passed from hand to hand and flipped over beneath the work-tables. I didn't like the place, but

• my dismissal from it was a worse shock than my first. The stamps were kept in a drawer without a lock, open a great deal of the time, and when both door and windows were open too, a sheet would often lift up and be found blowing about the floor. As work was ending one afternoon, I was told the manager wanted to see me. He hardly looked up from his desk. "I understand you look after the stamps, Miss Stelling," he said. "I am also told that a considerable quantity have been found to be missing. We don't like that kind of thing going on in our firm, but we don't want to make a fuss. You can see the cashier." It wasn't till he repeated I could go that I realized that I was being accused of stealing. Indignation rose in me. I had not stolen a thing, and he had not even troubled to ask me for an explanation. And then, as I stood confused and hesitant, "Once a thief, always a thief," ran through my head. "He must know about the school." I could not afford to be indignant. Instead, I burst into tears, which he must have taken as a confession of guilt, and stumbled from the room.

I hardly dared speak on my next week-end in the country of what had happened, but Mrs. Brown surprised me by her sympathy. "What a monstrous way to behave!" she exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell your manager what you thought of him, child?" That I couldn't explain. I went back to the Regent Street firm for their January sale, and then on to a dressmaker's in Bond Street. The pay was poor, six shillings a week, which I and my companions spent entirely on chocolates, but my keep at the hostel was being paid, through the

school, by my stepfather. Our job was to keep the appointment book for fittings, to pick up pins after them and to keep the show-room dusted. From the mannequins, in their cretonne-curtained room, I heard more sexual talk than ever before. Outside the shop they appeared to be, from their conversation, a kind of living and recumbent penny-in-the-slot machines, passive receptacles for dinners and embraces. One, dark and olive-skinned, talked most about her illegitimate child; another, of the languid fairness that runs to fat at twenty-five, about the week-ends she spent in Paris with a little foreign furrier. They were constantly interrupting their talk by little caressing gestures, little cries of "Let me brush you down, darling!" From the dressmaker's the Browns arranged for me to go to an art needlework shop kept by a cousin off the Marylebone Road. Its stock consisted of hand-knitted jumpers, raffia hats and bags, and hand-painted pottery, and my cousin had a small clientele among the doctors' wives of Harley Street. She seemed to think, however, that the fact that she was a lady absolved her from the necessity either of keeping proper books or of maintaining competitive prices. Her favourite phrase to faithful customers was: "If you could see my books! The mess they're in!"; to doubtful ones: "But then it's *hand-made*." If this overwhelming argument left them still protesting that they could buy the same articles at Selfridge's for half the price, she produced another controversial club. "Of course," she would say, "these big stores have ways and means of getting hold of their things that we haven't." And should the

sceptic depart unconvinced she would turn to me with: "Not a nice woman, Sheila. I'm *glad* she didn't buy anything here." Cousin Sylvia must have been told in her distant youth, when shopkeeping was unthinkable, that tradesmen made more money than gentlefolk. Now she appeared to believe that merely to be established in a shop was to be camped over the shaft of a gold-mine. Sometimes, when I brought her one more cup of tea after a fresh rearrangement of the window, she would tell me of what she planned to do when she had made her fortune. She dismissed me because she wasn't making enough money to keep me, and shortly after the shop shut down.

By this time I had moved to another lodging, off Baker Street. It called itself a Hostel for Working Girls and its terms were sixteen shillings a week all found. It was run by a veteran spinster, from the neck of whose openwork-crochet jumper rose the head of a female looking like Wallace Beery. The fifty inmates slept in cubicled-off dormitories, with a honeysuckle- or bramble-framed text over each bed. There were texts everywhere: God feeding the sparrows in the bleak dining-room where we drank our watery breakfast tea; "Thou God Seest Me" in the bathroom and the lavatories. I shared a cubicle with a buyer named Hope, who boasted of being kept by two men. The fact that they were both named John enabled her to hold one's attention for even longer on her successful affairs, for when one asked some innocent question about a story she had told, she would burst out triumphantly: "No, that wasn't the Dutch John, that was

the other John!" But she too had to appear at the daily prayers, with two funeral hymns, that preceded breakfast, she had to be present at the weekly Bible meeting and to get a pass to be out after ten at night. It was only half a dozen of the weaker of us who let ourselves be dragged on Sunday morning to a Baptist chapel round the corner, where a drab religion was preached in a succession of nasal voices. We tried to hide our yawns as there poured on us from the pulpit a flood of imposing statistics about the number of heathen who had been converted last year, or were yearning to embrace the same boredom which we suffered. "Christianity," the drone went on, "is bringing the light of God's love even to darkest Africa." Love: it was a love that was as drained of warmth as the hostel itself, a love that was a frown and a threat if the love of men was a leer and a clutch.

After I left Cousin Sylvia's shop, the Browns decided that something serious must be done about my future. "There's only one thing for you, child," Mrs. Brown pronounced, after a Saturday evening charade. "We must get you on the stage. It's all a matter of influence. My husband knows several writers. We'll soon get things fixed up. You can't go on drifting like this." So I was fitted out with a large wardrobe of second-hand clothes, and amateurish efforts were made to procure me a trial. It was the first of the Brown's plans for me which had aroused my enthusiasm, and I was quite prepared to wait. But week-end after week-end passed, and the replies Mr. Brown received were all apologies that things were rather tight at the

moment or explanations that "of course it would be easier if your protégé had had a little training." I was beginning to feel myself a burden, and then one morning the female looking like Wallace Beery at the hostel attacked me.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "You haven't been out to work for several weeks."

"Well, I'm being provided for."

"This is a home for working girls, not for idlers," she sniffed.

It came over me suddenly that I was tired of being planned for. I would take my life in my own hands. Hoping little, I answered an advertisement in the *Daily Telegraph*.

"Ladies of good appearance and education," it read, "wanted to train as salesladies for superior commodity. No experience necessary."

CHAPTER V

A RETIRED naval commander with a bright blue eye and dirty plus-fours was addressing a selected twenty of us in an upper room of the Marylebone hotel. "Good salesmanship," he was saying, "is twenty per cent. knowledge of your subject, forty per cent. psychology and forty per cent. personality. Psychology's like playin' a trout when you're fishin'. You've got to see the trout's point of view, if you follow me, let him have his head and get him through his own weaknesses. Personality's the secret of puttin' yourself over big with people who don't want to listen to you. Every-one's got a personality, but if you want to develop it, there's only one sure tip: keep cool and keep smilin'. I'm not the sort of fellow to blow my own trumpet, but I know in the Service I could always get double the work out of the troops if I went about it with a smile. Sounds simple: it *is* simple. Now I remember at Jutland."

We who listened to him had been chosen out of two hundred odd applicants to do door-to-door canvassing for a water-softener. We had just begun a fortnight's training, for which we were to be paid £4, and we were then to go out on the road selling on com-

' mission, which ranged from £1 for the £6 10s. water-softener to £5 for the £70 model. In the hotel room which had been taken for our course we sat through lectures on what water is and why it must be softened, on how water-softeners are constructed and on the science of salesmanship. The older among us removed their eyes from the lecturer from time to time to scribble with stubby pencils in little coloured notebooks: "Psychology . . . trout . . . keep cool." Their pencils halted when it came to the word Jutland. The commander had said that piece before.

The audience—I was its youngest member—might have been drawn from the patient throng that shifts and shuffles its feet in the waiting-rooms of film-casting bureaus, resigned to the prospect of patching a meagre budget with three days' crowd work a month. There were the *ingénues*, the handful of girls in their early twenties, quite prepared, once off the doorstep, to treat the softener and its virtues as a vast joke. There were the faded drama actresses, harassed wives with ne'er-do-well husbands and three children to keep, for whom the canvassing represented one more last hope. There were the character parts, leathery-faced spinsters with ill-fitting shoes and a moulting fur round the neck, who talked so fluently that they could never stop talking. It was the older women who were the most enthusiastic, the least cynical about the softener. For them the time of migrant adventure was past; after a mere fortnight they had already come to feel themselves dependent on the appliance they were being taught to sell. From the way in which they spoke of it outside

the lecture-room you might have thought that they not only clung to it as a rock of stability in life, but venerated it, almost, as a beneficent god.

The commander only took the part of *compère* at the training course. Most of the lectures were given by an under-manager of the company, which also sold vacuum-cleaners. The English name he bore wasn't his real name. He was a Latvian Jew who, the well-informed discovered within the first two days, had come to England after the War knowing not a word of English. To-day he didn't display even the precision of a foreigner handling the language. His talk was as carelessly neat as his clothes. He was stocky and dark, quick as a lizard in his movements. He had green eyes and those heavy furrows down the cheeks which seem to be a kind of Russian confession of tragedy. I liked him on first sight.

People have always interested me more than things, and older people have always impressed me more than people of my own age. So, though I was quite disposed to be irreverent about the water-softener, my admiration for Victor turned me into a model pupil. My patter became irreproachable, my smile resistless. Victor came out with me on my first canvassing expeditions, in the Hampstead Garden Suburb and Golder's Green. After a morning's round we would stop for a cup of tea and a snack lunch at a Lyons' teashop or an Express Dairy. I learned that he was twenty-eight, played tennis and football and had read more in his few years in the country than I had ever forgotten. I saw that he had the kind of quick-

wittedness which impresses shopgirls and waitresses, and I drew a reflected glory from it. I noticed that his face, which might have looked heavy if it had been still, never could look heavy because it never was still. There was something whimsical about it; you could never tell what he was going to do next, only that it would be done in a hurry. He had a habit of drumming on the table when he was thinking. I suddenly saw that he looked much more like a professional pianist than a salesman. I still met Alec at the week-ends, and as I looked at the unpredictable jumping little man I thought of his lazy correctitude, his automatic doffing of his hat at the Cenotaph, his gestures one could always rely on to be the accepted ones. By comparison with Victor, he seemed flat and tasteless now. However tired I was, Victor made the work seem a great game. He treated me paternally in an impersonal, professional way. Within a few days I had resolved that I would make him treat me protectively, not because I was an employee, but because I was I.

Though we were on the company's books as sales-ladies, I was at first only a canvasser. My duty was to interview reluctant housewives and arrange as many "dems" as possible for the salesman who came round on my trail demonstrating and selling the water-softener. I had been primed at the course with the necessary technique for getting past the servants, who, if they were well trained, were as expert at rejecting canvassers as they were at fobbing off confidence men, beggars, hawkers and housebreakers. More firmly imprinted on my mind than the ten commandments were the in-

junctions never to state my business on the doorstep and never to ask for "the lady of the house." I knew I must convey the impression that I was, not a chance business caller, but a welcome acquaintance of the householder. Before I began my day's work I looked up in the directory the name of each resident in the street I was covering, and asked for Mrs. Blank at each door with a confident smile on my face. If Mrs. Blank was as feather-brained as most suburban housewives, she was likely enough to be guiltily asking herself, after the first twenty seconds' conversation, whether she oughtn't really to remember where she had met me before.

Even with all the backing of the course behind you, your reception varied. There was the little slavey, her hair in a hasty twist and her wet hands fumbling at her apron, who would sum you up at once: "Oh, is it about the 'Oover? We've got one." There was the superior parlour-maid, in violet print under her starch, who would inform you distantly: "Her ladyship never interviews callers at the door." There was the flushed and anxious father who imagined every ring at the bell to be a messenger from the hospital, come to announce the birth of his third child. It might be: "Madam is out." It quite often was: "I'm afraid poor Mrs. Blank died six months ago." But at every third house you got, at least, past the doorstep.

Once you were inside, your object was to stimulate your victim's interest in water-softeners (or vacuum-cleaners) by such a flood of talk that the objections of price and terms of purchase, when they eventually arose, were swept away like straws in a hurricane. To inspire

confidence, you adopted a detached, objective attitude towards the subject of water which might have been a compound of the district visitor's, the doctor's and the university extension lecturer's. "Do you suffer any discomfort from hardness of water in this district?" was the opening question. If this inquiry was followed by a puzzled silence you went on: "You realize that the water round here is full of lime and chalk." Should your listener still fail to be impressed, you took it for granted she was a half-wit. You painted a horrid picture of the dire results that followed, as might the day, the use of an unsoftened supply. Let the housewife continue to drink it, you assured her, and she would infallibly die at an early age from gallstones and kidney trouble. From this second drunkard's doom, only a water-softener could save her. Under its beneficent influence, not only would her life be prolonged, but her tea would appear to have twice the strength, her soap would lather better, her household bills would be halved because her kettles would take only half the time to boil.

At this point you often saw a distrustful frown forming on your victim's forehead and an objection framing itself on her lips. You had been trained to anticipate what it was: "But then filtered water tastes flat." So you continued by explaining with great emphasis that a water-softener was not a filter, though it was sometimes a little difficult to remember why. You had still, however, a trickier hurdle to surmount. You were rarely half-way through your praise of the softener when the housewife would interrupt with a

nervous question how much this priceless boon cost. At all hazards you must avoid answering. To reply frankly that it cost £6 10s. before you had finished weaving your spell was to earn a well-merited slam of the door. It would be slammed harder still if you had the softener with you, for the cheapest model was nothing but a little white flask, with a faucet on top, that had to be carried round and applied to whichever tap was being used at the time. So you side-stepped the inquiry till the last possible moment by declaring: "On our system, it doesn't cost you anything. You save as you buy."

All salesmanship is much alike. There is the same artfully sincere patter in the drawing-room, the same breezy cynicism about it among salesmen once they are outside. But compared with the peddling of vacuum-cleaners, to which I came later, the selling of water-softeners was a lofty and inspiring mission. Even ten years ago, in my experience, the carpet-owning population of southern England was what sales talk calls supersaturated with vacuum-cleaners. You weren't with them, pushing the sale of what might be a useful and probably was an ill-appreciated commodity. You were expending all your energies merely towards cutting the throat of a rival company. There was a feline malice behind your doorstep smile and your hall-way talk. So often was the production of your card greeted with the words: "Oh, but I've got a Hoover. I've had it only a year and it's working perfectly" that the sales chiefs had worked out a set reply to it. "Of course," the answer began, "I know it's one of the oldest machines on the market. " And you would do

your utmost to persuade the prospect to get back her deposit on her machine and start purchasing yours instead.

Maybe because the water-softener was a late-comer as an object of door-to-door selling, the housewife hadn't yet developed a protective resistance to it. There were at least ten objections, I found, which she could and did advance to the purchase for a vacuum-cleaner. She might reply that she had got one, that she couldn't afford one, that she didn't approve of hire-purchase (a lie), that she must ask her husband, that Mrs. J. up the road had one which she borrowed, that it encouraged servants to be lazy, that our Annie's very old-fashioned, she prefers the old brush and dustpan way, that there was only one carpet in the house, that a vacuum-cleaner removed the pile from a carpet (which is true).

To all these often-heard statements you would reply with the same eager smile: "Oh, do let our salesman just call and clean your carpet for you, simply to show you. You'll be amazed at the amount of dirt he'll be able to get out." When he arrived, of course, he would clean only enough of the carpet to expose how dirty the rest of it was, standing by mute as the housewife fought with the embarrassed consciousness that she would have to buy the machine if she were to save her reputation for cleanliness. Often she was really ashamed at the result of the demonstration. "I never did," she would say, not very far from tears. "Who'd 'a thought it could 'a been so dirty. You'll think I don't keep my home proper." On the other hand, she might save herself at the last moment by

suddenly remembering an appointment and hurry off leaving you in the air, your machine unpacked and your talk hardly begun. Or she might be of the naturally friendly character that firmly refuses to purchase but insists on detaining you while she retails the entire history of her domestic troubles. Then it was you who struggled to get away, while the compelling eye fixed you and the ruminant voice lapped round you with "My fifth was difficult."

But it gave you a sense of importance to return to the office at the end of the day and realize that your two dozen interviews would be added to the graphs of sales progress whose black lines climbed the sheets of stiff squared paper that fluttered on the walls. So many bells rung, so many streets trudged from door to banging door, so many hopeful good mornings said and forgotten: it seemed an activity soon dissolved in the air that closed behind your vanishing steps. But here it was, alive again, reincarnated in a stroke of impersonal ink that only facts could move. Beside the graphs hung large-scale maps of the suburbs and stencilled slogans of an aggressive optimism. "Believe in yourself and your prospect will believe in you," they read; "Make it a 'one more' day to-day." The salesmen were relating their odder experiences.

"I had an old girl to-day that was as deaf as a post. I started telling the tale, very loud, and she looked at me very hard. I talked louder and she looked harder till at last she burst out: 'It won't do, young man. You look in the Scriptures and you'll find it's all different. I'm a strict Baptist,' she said, 'always have been and al-

, ways shall be. *Good morning.*'”

“That’s nothing to me, two days ago. Didn’t I tell you? I had an old fellow, came to his own door, might have been an Army colonel. Didn’t give me a chance to say a word. Just puffed up his cheeks and roared at me, same as if he’d been in his own orderly-room. ‘Trouble with you unemployed men,’ he said, ‘is that you won’t understand that there’s work to be had if you’ll only look for it. Well. Go and look for it.’ He banged the door and I nearly burst.”

Most of the male staff belonged to that curious, unidentifiable class whose accent suggests they might be gentlemen till their manners make it plain they are not. They treated me with an uneasy mixture of chivalry and good-comradeship, never quite certain whether to tell an improper story before me, hesitating so self-consciously on the brink of it that their diffidence became more confusing than the joke could ever have been. There was only one of whose origins I could be sure. I first met Maurice sitting on the edge of the office table on Friday night waiting for my pay. Smoking was strictly forbidden in the room, but the air was never clear of stale smoke nor the floor of ash. Maurice jumped up beside me and offered me a cork-tipped cigarette, and within a few minutes we were crossing the road together in a chattering crowd for a cup of tea at the A B C.

Maurice was twenty-two years old: tall, dark and slim, with small hands and feet, and faintly ineffective. I learned that his mother was a Lady Maryland and

that the family had friends scattered all over the reticent streets and squares of Kensington and Bayswater. They were not rich; in fact, Lady Maryland was at the moment canvassing for a beauty preparation. But they usually lived rent free, for there was rarely a time when one of their better-off acquaintances wasn't in the country or abroad, leaving her house to Lady Maryland to look after.

Lady Maryland was small and hospitable and had the brisk busyness of a park sparrow. I was invited down for lunch to their latest house, in Chelsea. The brass glittered, the solid furniture was polished, though there were no signs of servants, but the meal was three-quarters of an hour late and Maurice's sister had to go out half-way through to search for more spoons. Mary was, at the moment, the family's problem. She had been seduced by her fiancé in an arm-chair in the drawing-room, the night before he sailed to take up a post in India, and she was now expecting a baby. She was fair-haired and lovely, with liquid sensual eyes that might have been perpetually about to fill with tears, and she spent most of the day reclining on a sofa looking like a Madonna. To me she seemed much too beautiful and inviting to be let out alone, but neither her brother nor her mother had a word of blame for her. They took her condition very calmly and spent a good deal of their time discussing generally wild-cat schemes for forcing the fiancé to return to London post-haste and do his duty. When Mary was out of the room Maurice suggested that he should go out to India himself and interview the lover with a horsewhip, and

though Lady Maryland was usually practical, she seemed to take this piece of heroics quite seriously and even speculated about the fare.

On Sundays we went to a church in Knightsbridge called the Haven. The vague poetry of its ritual captured our imagination. The prayers were in Latin, the hymns were often from Tagore, the altar was covered with gold plate and the air was always full of incense. The services were taken by an elderly and benevolent cleric who described himself, I fancy, as a Bishop of the Liberal Catholic Church. Into his sermons, which were very eloquent, the doctrines of every kind of crank faith used to find their way. The Bishop believed in re-incarnation and euthanasia, and was a ferocious enemy of blood sports. It was a disgrace, he often declared, that members of the royal family should patronize such iniquities as fox-hunting and stag-hunting. The world's useless people, he held, should be put weekly in a lethal chamber and gased. After the evening service he would stand at the door of the church, beaming broadly like a grey-haired Mr. Hore Belisha, to shake hands with the congregation as they went out. The inner circle of the worshippers, however, did not disperse at once. They went round to the Bishop's flat for drinks and discussions that often lasted far into the night. Maurice, who was a server, was one of this inner circle, and was very conceited about it. He used to borrow books from the Bishop's library, on Buddhism, theosophy and the lives of the Saints, and when I hinted that I would like to join one of the Sunday evening parties he was almost rude. "You wouldn't be able to

understand what we talk about," he said. "It's esoteric religion, above your head. It's no place for women." I must have been very tolerant of my young men then, for one evening when we came out of church at seven, Maurice asked me to wait on the pavement while he had a drink with the Bishop. He didn't emerge till eleven, and I was still waiting.

Once our expeditions had started there were very few weeks when Maurice didn't propose to me. He didn't only ask me face-to-face; he scribbled me little notes from Lyons' cafés on his canvassing round. "I'm writing this after three helpings of cold rice pudding," he would write, "so you'll see I'm not just feeling romantic. My mother wants to know when you're going to marry me." I said no consistently. I wasn't in love with him; if I had been, he was far too poor for marriage to be practical, and I was beginning to be more and more interested in Victor. There was nothing hesitant or ineffective about him. He was hard and real, and all the women in the office were after him. The most pathetic of his admirers was a canvasser with a pock-marked chin which looked as if it had been nibbled by a rat. She was one of the few really efficient workers in the team, and Victor used sometimes to accompany her on her rounds. But the companionship of doorstep and suburban A. B. C. was not enough for her. It was only a tantalizing foretaste of what might be if she could work her way into his private life as well. You could see her dreaming of it as her small brown eyes followed him about the room when she came up to draw her pay on a Friday. I understood, for I felt the

same myself. But he said nothing but a curt "Good night, Miss Mason."

One day as I entered the office Victor looked up from his desk and said briefly: "Care to come to the dogs to-night?" I saw a level country of unexplored happiness opening beyond the invitation as I accepted. Victor gave me dinner, explained the racing and dropped me on the doorstep of the hostel. I had never felt so close or friendly to anyone before; it was as if I had suddenly discovered the brother I never had. I gathered that Victor went to the Wood Green stadium regularly and betted a good deal. But he did it very systematically and carefully, working out little sums on the back of an envelope. He was as business-like about his bets as he was about his work, and at the end of the week he always came out a winner. His last words were a promise that next time he had a big win he would take me to the theatre, and he did.

From that time on, the three of us, Maurice, Victor and I, used to go about together. I had moved by now from the hostel to a room in Maida Vale where there was no ten p.m. curfew. It had a huge double bed with a honeycomb counterpane, three little scraps of red carpet, a heavy marble washstand, a ponderous wardrobe with a full-length glass, and a picture of the battle of Elandslaagte over the mantel-piece. We three seemed to share in the same treasure of happiness and irresponsibility. We stood about at street corners arguing endlessly what we should do with the endless evenings. We discovered all the cinemas in central London where there were sixpenny seats and all the

restaurants where you could have an enormous meal for a shilling. I left the two men on the pavement beneath my lodgings, our plans still undecided at nine o'clock, as I ran upstairs to change my stockings, and then we all piled giggling into a hansom for a destination of which we were even yet unsure. I had begun to be very vain about my appearance. I wore printed cotton frocks with very tight belts and tried experiments with my hair that varied from a *femme fatale* Eton crop with long earrings to an *ingénue* plastered fringe. And every morning, as soon as I got up, I would stare at myself for minutes together in the long glass.

Maurice, when he got me by myself, told me he didn't approve of my going out alone with Victor. "He won't get you anywhere," he said. "He won't marry you; he's not that kind." When we were together, the two never quarrelled, so I put the advice down to jealousy and disregarded it. In the intervals in the theatre and over the dinner table Victor was telling me little about his life. There was his boyhood in the little village inland from Riga, with the green plain rolling without limit to the east and the sea out of sight on the opposite horizon. He told me of how the vet came round to castrate horses, and the children, who had discovered there was a hole in the stable wall, used to take turns looking through it at the operation. He told me that when a single house caught fire it meant that the whole village burned down while frenzied peasants ran helplessly to the only well for futile buckets of water. Then there was his voyage to England and his stay in the tall, gloomy house of an aunt and uncle who were carpet

manufacturers in the city. They treated him as a changeling, at meals they gave him the smallest portions of food. The uncle often talked of taking him into partnership, and he began to go out with a young woman of his own race. But as the years passed it became evident that the talk was only a bait to induce him to work for the firm for smaller wages. He had left his relatives, he had starved for a year and his girl had dropped him. Then he had joined the water-softener firm and within three weeks had broken all records for salesmanship. After that they had made him supervisor, and now his future was assured.

Victor was a fanatical individualist and he had an almost morbid hatred of religion. "It's messy, Stelling, it's messy," he would say to me if I mentioned it to him; to the end he always called me by my surname. Maurice once persuaded him to go to the Haven on a Sunday evening. When I asked him next day what he thought of it he wrinkled up his face. "Still, the Bishop's a personality," he relented, seeing my expression of disappointment. He had just taken to driving and bought an old car, and it was through finding a copy of *The Rainbow* in a pocket of it that I was introduced to D. H. Lawrence. Lawrence was one of his heroes, and so were Anatole France and Bernard Shaw, and I borrowed most of their books from him and took them home. But he was strangely critical of my acquired enthusiasms. "When you know that you know nothing, Stelling, then you will know something," he said. He couldn't take me for granted as a girl of eighteen. It seemed sometimes as if he almost resented my age.

Perhaps it was only that he resented my not being the young girl he had lost. Or maybe, I see now, with true masculinity he demanded that his women should be a mere complement to himself and fretted because I took so long to mould to the shape he required.

I wasn't rich in those days. The Browns were making me a small allowance, but it paid for little more than my half-board and lodging. There were weeks when I earned so little from the water-softeners that day after day I had to walk up from Maida Vale to my district in Golder's Green to save the bus fare. On evenings when I wasn't going out with Maurice and Victor I went regularly to Lyons' Corner House to hear a violinist named Hoffman play. I had formed a distant and romantic attachment for him, and I spent most of my pocket-money buying egg mayonnaises and ice-creams so that I might be able to sit undisturbed and listen to him. I played with a secret dream that one day I might be able to save enough to buy a violin and take lessons from Hoffman.

Little by little Maurice began to drop out of the three-cornered parties, and I had Victor to myself. The more I knew him, the more my admiration for him grew. There was nothing sexual about our relationship. We were like a brother and his favourite sister. We talked to each other in a language of high-spirited nonsense that can only be understood by people who are very close together. I had never been happier in my life. It lasted about four months.

CHAPTER VI

FOR all the enthusiasm for my work that Victor inspired in me, I didn't last long at the water-softener job. I went from it to a post with an agency, and left them to sell furniture polish from door to door for a firm which had head offices in Houndsditch. After that I became secretary to a business man in Regent Street who ran a chain of country clubs and interpreted the duties of a secretary in a very liberal spirit. Then I became canvasser for a cheap vacuum-cleaner company which, in return for my three pounds a week and commission, expected me to book ten demonstrations a day in districts of dreary Council houses where I must take my turn on the doorstep with the brush-salesman, the rag-and-bone man, the old-clothes man and the tally man. From them I returned once more to the water-softeners. I came back to that office three separate times, and through all my migrations I was still seeing and going out with Victor.

The Regent Street job cost me the friendship of the Browns. For some time the atmosphere on my week-end visits had not been the same. Mrs. Brown had begun to complain of my make-up and my high

heels and my shiftlessness. "Why can't you keep your jobs, child?" she asked. "Other girls manage to." I had ceased to be a pet; I had become a problem. My Regent Street employer was a little bald Scotsman with cold blue eyes. Whenever they were fixed on me I felt that, behind their immediate purpose, they were carefully calculating my price. He would make occasions to come over to my desk and lay his hand lightly on my shoulder; as the days passed, the hand weighed each time a little heavier. He asked me out to dinner. I refused as often as I could. Then one Saturday it was arranged that we should go down to Nottingham to open a new country club. Among the party was a young man, another member of the firm, who spent much of the day laughing and talking with me. My employer was jealous. His revenge was to put it all over the office on Monday that I had spent the week-end with his rival. The accusation was completely untrue. I appealed to the Browns in a fury. Mr. Brown came up to town and interviewed the old Scotsman. What was said I do not know. But it was my word against my employer's, and I was young and flighty and he was middle-aged and respectable. I can imagine the measured words in which he put his case and the reasonableness of his cold eyes: what had he to gain by slander-ing me? I can imagine Mr. Brown invaded by a sinking feeling that I was guilty after all, and that he had been brought up to London simply because I must have an excuse for walking out of one more post. Perhaps one needs to be depraved oneself to see through to the depravity of the middle-aged male. Next day I got

from Mrs. Brown a letter which made it impossible for me ever to go down to her again. She had accepted everything that the Scotsman had said against me. As if it wasn't enough, she wrote, to throw away my reputation with the first comer, I had told silly lies about it and dragged her husband into the grimy business.

I don't think I am a querulous person, but I sometimes wonder whether the Browns, without ever knowing or wishing it, didn't drive me on the streets with their aimless benevolence. They had two choices before them, once they had accepted the responsibility for me. They might have had me trained for a steady profession. They might have married me off. Knowing my family history and my circumstances as they did, what third path could they have seen before me but one, if they had tried to see?

More and more frequently now men were attempting me. There was an old man in the water-softener office who had long pursued me with his eyes. He had a red and blotted face and a little paunch that gave the impression less of belonging to him than of going on ahead of him as he walked. He appeared to work in the mornings with a metal-topped walking-stick tucked under his arm and a carnation in the buttonhole of his faded suit, and he was shaken at intervals by a dry cigarette cough. The firm gave him notice and his attentions redoubled. I couldn't appear in the room without his calling softly to me: "Miss Stelling." Twisting my belt in my hands, I stood in front of his desk as he framed a fresh invitation to dinner or the cinema. He resorted to little bribes to win me. One

day when he called me over I found he had secreted in a drawer two slices of Dundee cake and a fistful of cigarettes which he pressed into my hands. His invitations became so persistent that they wore down my resistance. I agreed to dine with him and we went to a pub at the top of Baker Street. He gave me a steak and a pêche Melba with a bottle of red wine, a great number of gins and vermouths before the meal and as many ports as I could drink afterwards. His eyes kept flitting from me to my glass, which he filled up at once with nervous intentness as soon as it was empty. There was something in his gaze of the anxious cook who is trying a new dish and cannot be quite certain when it is fully done. My spirits rose; it was the first time I had ever been drunk. "What are you looking at me like that for?" I cried, and burst into helpless giggles. He paid the bill with fumbling hands and called for a taxi. When he had put me in, he told the driver to drive round and round Regent's Park, and as soon as we had left the lights he started to attack me. I fought and screamed so that even the taximan turned his head, and he had to drop me at my Maida Vale rooms.

The old man was leaving the office in a few days, so he must have known he was safe from complaint. But a week or two later I was attacked again, by a customer. He was a tall, lank, effeminate man, to whom I sold a water-softener at his Golder's Green house. He invited me to dinner, made me very drunk, carried me up to his bedroom and began to undress me. I screamed so desperately that he gave up the attempt, drove me home in his sports car and on the doorstep pressed two

pound notes into my hand. I was too far gone to think of refusing. I left the water-softeners once more, and within a few days my next employer had asked me to his home and made me drunk on cheap port and whisky. He tried to take my clothes off and ended the evening by bundling me into the street because his wife was coming back.

Perhaps I was asking for trouble in accepting drink from men, when I knew they only plied me with it in order to seduce me. But drink gave me so much that nothing else could. It turned the world into a warm and friendly place that accepted me without sniffing at me. I forgot my shyness and became gay and giggly. I left my loneliness behind me like a distant shore from which one is sailing on a long voyage. For loneliness was my chief dread. It haunted me in the most cheerful company, with the least reserved people. I couldn't believe that they would really go on liking me; I couldn't be certain that their goodwill wasn't a polite pretence. All the background of my life had been one of shifting relations and unreliable loves. Was there any reason why things should change now? Maybe my lack of confidence robbed me of that protective resistance which most girls develop towards the predatory male and left me in the position of those hereditary sufferers who are born with one skin too few. Certainly Victor didn't make it any easier for me to resist. His attitude towards me was changing and coarsening; slowly the honeymoon stage of our acquaintance was breaking up. Once I had only to ring him up for him to suggest immediately that we should go out together. Now it

was I who had to make the suggestions, and then often enough he would discover that he already had an engagement. As his casualness increased he was becoming less and less like a brother and more and more like one of the seducers. It was as if he had exhausted the possibilities of my companionship and was guiltily seeking to whip himself into fresh enthusiasm for me by flinging himself into contact with my body.

The farther he drifted from me, the more the thought of him filled all my days. The world apart from him meant nothing. I went about its business in a dream, eating, drinking, working, saying yes and no like an automaton. It was in one of those vacant moods that I met disaster.

I had gone into a teashop late in the evening for a cup of tea before returning to my rooms. Two East Enders, with the broad, flat face that comes from the great plain of Europe, sat down uninvited at my table and started to make conversation about me.

"Pity to see a nice little girl like this sitting all by her lonesome," one said.

"I'll say she ought to have someone to look after her," his companion replied.

I paid no attention to them. I didn't even shudder. They tried a frontal attack.

"Won't you have your cup of tea with us, little miss-all-by-herself?"

The second man inclined his shining face winningly.

Yes was as good an answer as any other. I said yes.

They began to talk, to each other and to me alternately, with a quick and clumsy gaiety, like a fair barker who is trying to attract a crowd or a hypnotist who is fighting to drown his patient's will.

"She's a pretty little girl, isn't she? A little bit less of her and she'd just disappear. I'll say Aunt Sarah would be all over her."

"Sure, so would mother and the kids. You been slaving away at your desk all day, little miss? You want more than a cup of tea after that to keep up your strength. Don't want to fade away, do you?"

We were at the door by now. They had announced their names as Len and Sol and discovered that mine was Sheila. On the pavement, Len clapped his hand to his head as if struck by a sudden idea. Wouldn't I come back with them to their home in Hoxton, he asked, where I could have a real meal and meet their family and join a jolly party? I looked at the two and their mauve suits absently and decided I disliked them. As absently, I said yes again.

Len hailed a taxi with the air of an investor making the plunge that may bring him a fortune. He and Sol sat on either side of me, each holding a hand. They said little now, as men whose work is done, except for an occasional exclamation that we were nearly there or how the family would like me. If I had any feeling, it was one of relief that they had stopped talking. The cab dropped us at a dingy front door in a back street. There was no light in any of the windows. A fumbling key let us into a darkened hall. Len threw open another door and lit a match. A hissing gas jet revealed a bare

little room with a horsehair sofa and a dusty grate. Suddenly I realized that there was no meal, no jolly party, no family. There were just the two men. Sol locked the door and put the key in his pocket.

I stood shivering by the fireplace. I couldn't dare to think how they would begin. Len was removing an artificial diamond tiepin. "Come and sit down with me, sweetie," he said, patting the sofa, "and we'll all have a good time." I felt at all costs I must avoid the sofa. I started to cry, and he came towards me with a heavy arm. His face was flushed and his eyes were full of relentless rut.

"Don't scream," he said. "It's no use yowling."

"The house is empty," Sol said. "No one'll hear, however loud you bawl. It's only for your own sake."

I tried to retreat, but there was no getting beyond the fireplace. The two were muttering irritably as if I were a machine that had refused to work. "Don't you try kidding us, you didn't know what we were after," they grumbled. "A girl like you isn't taken in that simple. You knew the kind of party you were coming to and now you've got it."

They forced me down on the hard horsehair. "Oh, please don't, oh, please," I said. "For God's sake, don't, I'm innocent!" Neither replied, and all my struggles were useless.

After a while it was over and the light went out and I could only hear their heavy breathing and the drip of rain from a spout outside. I couldn't sleep. I wept the whole night. As a grimy dawn crept through the window, they rose and smoothed their clothes and

, went into the passage to wash. I think they were ashamed of what they had done, for they whispered to each other in a foreign language and avoided looking at me. I only caught one phrase of English through the open door: "I believe the bloody girl *was* a virgin." They took me down the street to a glaring teashop, where sleepy waitresses were still pulling down last night's piled chairs, and gave me a cup of bitter tea and put me on a west-bound bus. To me they didn't say a word except "Feeling better to-day, kid?" and "So long."

I can't understand even now how that night happened. I couldn't understand it then. It seemed something that had occurred outside my life, in a world that wasn't either real or dream. And so within a few days it had faded out of my memory. All the mark it had left on my mind was the sense that there was no reason left why I should say no to Victor.

Within a few weeks he had seduced me, on another horsehair sofa, in the sitting-room of his Highbury lodgings. He shared them with a friend, who slept in the bedroom next door, so we had to talk in whispers. He was a clumsy, hurried lover, and he had to turn me out half-way through the night. His landlady, who admired him and treated him as a second son, got up at five o'clock to start doing the house, and she must not know that I had been there. But after that we began to spend week-ends together. He usually drove me in his car to a little inn in Hertfordshire. He was entirely frank about his feelings to me. "I like you, Stelling, I want you, you're very lovely," he repeated, "but I'm

not going to marry you. You haven't got the brains." And then, in bed beside me, he would cry helplessly for minutes together in the dark, and he could never tell me why.

Alec had become my lover too. He was down from Cambridge and in the City now, and the evening before he married the doctor's daughter whom the family all thought so suitable, he asked me up to his flat to dinner and made vain and violent love to me. A few weeks later he invited me up again, this time for a week-end. His wife was away in the country, but it was her photograph that stood on the drawing-room mantelpiece, her brushes that were mutely aligned on the bedroom dressing-table. Seeing them, I felt a strange jealousy, not so much of her, but of time. All this should have happened two years earlier, and not there. It should have been done in the light of day, and now it was being done in a corner, with little flurries of anxiety lest a ring at the door should be some awkward caller. It should have been the culmination of all our dead closeness and understanding, and now it was a mere incident that Monday's milkman would wipe out. Alec wasn't happy about it either. He tried to excuse himself in half-hearted little catch-phrases for betraying his wife on the morrow of their wedding. He said, with a bookish assumption of worldliness, that every man should have a mistress, and the sooner the better. It was almost as if I were being made love to by a stranger. I found myself thinking about words, wondering what to say next. There was a greyness in my mind as I descended the stairs on Monday morning to go to my

work.

But I came again. I wasn't in love with Alec. I hadn't the nymphomaniac's thirst for raw sensation. I thought of sex as something frightening and cruel. But I felt that the seductions were pennies one had to pay for men's company and friendship. If I didn't give in to them, they would lose interest in me and leave me. And Alec had too uneasy a conscience to treat me entirely as an instrument, to be taken down from its shelf only when it was required for use. He invited me to dinner to meet his wife. He stood over us, the perfect young husband, and said in his slow drawl that he hoped we should see more of each other. And in a few days there would be another telephone call and another week-end, and Alec would indulge his passion for buying things by giving me a little present or a cheque to get a winter coat. I sometimes wondered whether the moment when he handed the present to me and felt, with a wave of self-conceit, that he had bought me wasn't for him the crowning point of all our times together.

With Victor I began to be conscious that even the pennies had failed to buy his friendship. He didn't answer the telephone himself now when I rang; he told the operator or a colleague to say he was out. I wrote to him and there was no reply. I inquired from fellow-employees at the office and found that on Saturdays he had started to drive down to the country with men companions and pick up girls on the seaside fronts. When he did see me, he was more physically ardent than ever. He explained that unless we spaced out our

meetings he couldn't come to me with a fresh mind. If we were always in each other's pockets he would become stale and unamusing. That would never have occurred to either of us a few months before. I noticed that he was wearing a new and expensive-looking tie, and he said it had been given to him by the young woman who had dropped him when he was poor and who was now beginning to see him again. I asked myself whether he was using me as a lightning conductor for the feelings she was too cautious to let him express with her. I felt my question was answered when I met her one night with him at the Corner House. Her quiet tweed clothes might have been chosen as a deliberate contrast with my guinea gownshop gaudiness. She had a muddy complexion, and she looked at me from behind horn-rimmed spectacles with shrewd brown eyes. "So you're Miss Stelling," she said. "I've heard such a lot about you." I wondered just what she had heard, but she wasn't giving anything away. I don't think she ever would.

I had nothing to hope of Victor now, but I couldn't face the fact, and once more I was invaded by a mood of inertia. I had moved my rooms and was living in a house in Bayswater where the landlady, a hard little Frenchwoman, robbed me of my evening cloak and was always asking me to come to tea with her at the Regent Palace. I suppose she meant to get me off with a man and then prey on me, but I wasn't ready for that yet. And then, standing at a crossing in Shaftesbury Avenue one evening I was accosted by a man. He asked me whether I would come and dine with him at the Eiffel

Tower. There was no reason why I should give one answer rather than the other. I went.

Over dinner I discovered that his name was Freddie and that he wrote scenarios for the pictures. He was tall, with curling moustaches and bright brown eyes, and might have stepped from a London Transport advertisement of the mashers of the Naughty Nineties. The fingers of his small hands curled back at the tips and he talked in a soft voice with a slight American accent. I found that he knew Mr. Ingram, the artist friend of my stepfather's whom I had met down in the country with the Browns, and I began to feel that he was less a pick-up than an old acquaintance. He didn't force drink on me, but I drank a good deal and by the end of dinner it must have been plain that I wasn't fit to go home by myself. He was staying in the hotel above the restaurant, and when we had finished eating he took me up to his room. There was only one large bed.

"You'd better sleep here, child," he said. "I shan't molest you, don't you worry." He didn't. He gave me a pair of his own striped silk pyjamas and turned out the light and we went to sleep.

"See here, child, I like you," he told me next morning when we had finished breakfast in bed. "I've just made two hundred out of a film; there's no point in letting it rust away in the bank. You come and live with me while it lasts. Keep on your rooms, because it won't last for ever, and give up your silly job and run along and get your things and come back here." He gave me a five-pound note and an American five-

dollar gold piece and I went. Both the coin and the note I had lost within an hour, buying plums at a street stall.

But it didn't matter. I had begun a new life, in which the only day that counted was to-day. As soon as the pubs opened, Freddie took me round to one of the two bars in Northern Soho where artists and writers bought seemingly limitless quantities of drink with an endless lack of cash. Almost all the men wore beards or corduroy trousers or carried black portfolios under their arms, and most of the women were hatless. Already at five past eleven there were a number of sparse figures round the counter, apparently curing themselves of last night's party with the aid of a hair of the dog that bit them. I was introduced all round, and everyone thought I was charming and told me so without the least affectation. "Come over here and meet Sheila," Betty Cousins, the novelist, shouted to a friend. "She's only eighteen and she's very lovely and she's living with Freddie. I believe he's her first man."

The spirit of free love hung about the dingy counter and the stained tables and the rickety chairs of the dark and lofty saloon. The artists had none of the clumsy phrase-making or the ponderous roundabout gaiety of the salesman and clerks I was accustomed to meet. They took my hand and gazed in my eyes and paid me compliments without a trace of embarrassment. With them there was no question of being turned out of the house at four in the morning to satisfy the principles of a puritan landlady. You could sit on their knees and kiss them and go to bed with them, and there was no

ticket to pay for it. Not that I wanted particularly to go to bed with any of them, but it was an exhilaration to meet people who defied all the ogreish mustn'ts which had dominated everyone I had met till then, and who weren't afraid of owing to what they did. They talked communism, sex, birth control, art, each other's novels, with an enthusiasm that seemed to care little whether you listened or not. Those who were certain were magnificently dictatorial, and even those who were diffident were informed. Towards drink they had an almost religious attitude; many of them, I believe, would have been genuinely shocked if they heard that you hadn't been to a pub yesterday. They were boastful, egotistical, lying and vain. You were on intimate terms with every one of them as soon as you met them, yet you never knew a single one. But I thought they were real people, the first real people I had ever seen.

I ran Freddie up an immense bill at the Eiffel Tower. Every morning I had a pound of strawberries for breakfast, and they were out of season. I rarely travelled anywhere except in a taxi, and often I kept it waiting an hour at a time. We took to starting the day with a bottle of champagne at eleven. It would be early if we got to bed before three o'clock. There were parties at the Cavendish where wine, unless you otherwise qualified it, meant only champagne, and that in magnums, and where port, if you ordered it, appeared in magnums too. Someone would take the whim to summon a negro band, and dancing would go on till five in the morning. Freddie gave me money to buy shoes and hats and clothes and chocolates. We lived at

the rate of at least ten pounds a day. It lasted just over a fortnight.

"I'm beginning to run short of cash, child. I'm afraid you'll have to go," Freddie said one morning. I wasn't alarmed, because only a day or two previously I had met a vague young man named Thomas, who lived in a mews in Mayfair. His first words to me had been: "When Freddie is through with you, come round to me," and I did. Thomas's ambition was to be taken for an intellectual, but he never succeeded in looking like anything but a guardsman. He lived in a state of permanent confusion. The flat was rarely empty of strangers, who sometimes used to walk in casually to make love on the bed. Thomas stamped on the bath-towels and flung the boot-brushes in the bath. He was usually just out of a promising job. The tables were always covered with dirty glasses and the coal-scuttle filled with unpaid bills. To mounting debts and vanishing posts his unique reaction was a guardee drawl of: "The Lord invariably provides."

Thomas never made any attempt to touch me. I slept on a mattress laid on the sitting-room floor and succeeded in reducing the flat to a speedily dissipated order. When I grew tired of it, I would ring up Victor and go out with him. "Turning into a bit of a bird, aren't you Stelling?" he said to me one day, but he exerted no effort to save me from my new way of living. If he had only suggested to me that I should try to get a steady job and settle down in a tiny flat and cut loose from the Bohemians, I think I should have done it. It would have been easy for him to point out

hat I had nothing to gain from any of the crowd I went about with; that none of them had any sense of morals or responsibility; that they would do no more than pass me from hand to hand among them like the latest newly glittering toy. He never said a word.

Thomas asked me to marry him from time to time. I told him I didn't love him. It wasn't the real reason, perhaps. I knew he was attracted to me, but I still felt serious about marriage. I shouldn't have gone on being a toy after a few months, and then there would have been nothing left between us. I felt I oughtn't to marry anyone who wasn't prepared to settle down with me for good. And then I discovered that I was going to have a baby.

I discovered it late, and because of that I was all the more lethargic. I challenged Freddie. He said he was incapable of producing a child. Victor was frivolous at first. He asked me why I couldn't put the baby in a bush. Then he assumed that mask of coldness and practicality behind which an embarrassed man hides his sense of guilt. He talked of operations. I put off deciding on the plea that it was late, and then it became later still and I was afraid of interfering. I had left the Mayfair mews. One night at a club where I had gone with Thomas he had been pursued by a bald-headed, middle-aged man who claimed loudly to be a black magician. He had disentangled himself from the bar at last and came back to my table with the plea: "Do save me from that creature. He wants to seduce me." I was so disgusted with the idea of a man needing protection that I had quarrelled with him on the spot

and returned to my rooms in Bayswater.

I had got to go through with it and have the baby. For a while I went back and worked at the water-softeners. Then I felt beyond that. Victor volunteered no help and I couldn't ask him: Freddie gave me a cheque for sixteen pounds, all he had, he said. Alec promised he would allow me five pounds a month till it was all over. My only concern was to leave the French landlady and to be near Victor, however little he wanted to see me. I trailed up to Highbury and stopped at random at a corner tobacco-shop.

"Cheap lodgings?" said the man behind the counter, ferreting in a large round tin of snuff. "Yes. Across the way. Number twelve's cheap enough."

CHAPTER VII

"COME in, girl. It's dark, we've 'ad the gas cut off."

I stood hesitating on the doorstep of the big, dingy Victorian house. A yellowing card in a dusty ground-floor pane offered Board Residence. From an upper window a line of frayed washing fluttered limply in the damp wind. Behind the landlady's square figure there drifted down the lino'd hall a smell that wasn't either cooking or animals, and the screeching of a cockatoo rose fitfully from below the basement stairs.

I had known the kind of landlady she would be before she opened the door. It wasn't till I had pulled the tarnished brass bell-knob three times that I realized the wire was broken. Then I had beaten on the knocker. There wasn't a sound within. I looked over the area railings. A dim light flickered beyond the basement window. I beat again. At last I heard a distant slipped shuffling growing nearer behind the peeling brown door.

Mrs Sarum was tall and broad, with curly white hair still in last night's curl-papers. One of her black cotton stockings had wrinkled down below her knee, her feet were sticking through the toes of her slippers and she wore a black dress with a pattern of faded

flowers and a grease-stained apron. In her right hand she carried a stubby, yellow-handled kitchen knife with a flake of cheese on the edge, and she was still munching at an indeterminate meal as she opened the door.

"You want a nice, quiet room, girl?" she said. "Well, I won't say it's not plain 'ere. I won't say it's not rough-and-ready. But I think you'll find it homey. My terms are a pound a week, all found. Like to see the room?"

All the money I had in the world was Alec's first five pounds, clutched in my bag, and I couldn't afford to be fastidious. Wherever I went, a pound a week would hardly get me more than the dark hall and the narrow bedroom, with its wall-paper pattern of delirious autumn leaves. Mrs Sarum at least appeared friendly. Doorstep after grimy doorstep, length after length of darkening street stretched ahead of me if I wanted to pick and choose my refuge. I was content for the first chance knock to have picked it for me. I hardly looked at the lumpy bed and the cracked washstand. I said yes and yes, and I moved in that night with my belongings from my lodgings in Bayswater.

An odour of decay and of futureless despair hung about the Sarum's house. Long ago, in the distant years when Canonbury was a quarter of prosperous business folk, Mrs Sarum's father had been a rich fish-monger who drove to his shop in the morning in a carriage and pair. In those days nine o'clock had seen carriages waiting before almost every one of the pillared porticoes where squalling children now played. Mrs

Sarum and her three sisters had everything they wanted. They collected Honiton lace and miniatures; there were champagne and oyster suppers. The four had married, all badly. Their parents had died, the shop had gone downhill. Now all that was left to Mrs Sarum was the house, with its heavy pillars, its barren apple tree in the back garden and its spacious memories of her vanished happy childhood. Mr Sarum, of course, was left too, but he had never been much more than a parasite. For thirty years he had been looking for a job, and he had not found it yet. To-day he slept on the kitchen floor, with the cockatoo above him, and it was only after dark that he would shuffle upstairs, rubbing his rheumatically knees, to take a turn to the pub for a jug of Burton. The house, though, was the centre of Mrs Sarum's existence. Despite the fact that she had fallen to taking in lodgers, it was irredeemably mortgaged. It was fantastically dirty. But she clung to it as close as if it had been her own soul.

The only person in the house with money was a chartered accountant, who had two rooms on the first floor. He earned great respect for himself because he had been to a public school and went for occasional week-ends to Bournemouth. On the top floor were two Welshmen who worked in a postal sorting office. One of them was coughing all the time, with the beginnings of consumption. But they shared the same bed, to save their pay, for David, the consumptive, worked the night shift and Ifor, his friend, the day. There were a raw-boned Newcastle girl, Annie, and her Welsh companion Gwen, in and out of daily domestic posts,

who would come down to breakfast with uncombed hair and dirty shoulder-straps. There was a paralysed sister of Mrs Sarum's, who had lived for years barricaded in a back room on the second floor. Once a handsome, gipsyish woman, she was unable to move now for an ulcerated leg, which she refused to have amputated. She would not open her door more than a chink at a time for fear the visitor might be a doctor, come to chop her leg off. She took snuff, drank Burton and washed once a week. The Welshmen said she was the cause of the strange smell that hung about the stairs.

The work of the house was done by a hunchbacked little old slavey who slept in her rusty black clothes and was always scratching. She regarded the lodgers with contempt; her invariable reply to a request from any of them was a prolonged sniff. There was only one way of purchasing her attention: to give her sixpence to go round to the pub for a jug of stout. The effect was as instant as that of an electric shock on a frog's leg. For the rest of the day she would greet your every appearance with an effusive: "Now what might you be wanting, Miss Stelling?" But by the next morning she was back to her sniffs again. One of the chief themes of Mrs Sarum's long, continuous monologue against the world was the laziness and insolence of Liza. "I'll 'ave to get rid of that old Liza," she declared. "She takes too much on herself." Of course, Liza never went.

David, the consumptive Welshman, had a fierce volubility. He didn't smoke, he didn't drink, but he talked of anything and everything, and he put all his

energy into his talk. He would talk of the mines as of a subterranean nightmare from which he hadn't yet escaped, though he had fled two hundred miles from them. You could see that though he hated and feared them, he still felt a tug of resentful loyalty for them and a sense of almost conscious guilt that he had left them behind. David told of the rows of crazy back-to-back cottages, in one of which he was born and where he had assisted at five of his own mother's confinements. He would burst into fiery arguments about religion, for he was a fanatical rationalist: Pontius Pilate, he argued, was the real hero of Christianity, and next to him Judas Iscariot. Ifor was more silent, though he had a deep and fascinating speaking voice and made you feel when he sang hymns round the fireside that he ought to have been an opera-singer. He was tall and slim, with copper-coloured hair and eyes, and rather abrupt in his manner. He had fallen in love with Gwen, one of the two shiftless daily servants; the morning after he first seduced her she told us the whole story over the breakfast table. Gwen nagged him relentlessly. She would scream upstairs to him to come and iron her cami-knickers. Four flights down, you could hear her voice outside his door: "I've been knocking here for hours. If you don't come out, I'll crown you." But at bedtime she would fawn on him, her head, with its long hair and soft bedroom eyes, in his lap. "Well, folks," he would mutter at last, "I think I'll be going to gwelli," and shamefacedly, one after the other, they would creep up to bed together. Ifor was very devoted and gentle. I was making tapestry bags to pass the

time. He asked me humbly to teach him too, so that he could make one as a present for Gwen, and then night after night he sat up late and practised with clumsy fingers over the fire at my side.

Besides the lodgers, there were a number of miscellaneous hangers-on who used to frequent the house. Most of them were former residents. They would appear without warning at the winkle or shrimp teas which began at half-past five in the afternoon. They would sometimes join in the choruses of Welsh hymns which the two postal sorters would lead round the dining-room fire on Saturday night. One of them, another daily servant, borrowed my bed to sleep with her soldier lover. Mrs Sarum did not seem to notice the additions to her table. She continued to bang down before us huge plates of swimming stew or mountains of bread and cheese with the encouragement: "Fill your belly, girl. Do you good." Sometimes she complained a little after a Sunday when the lodgers had been unusually hospitable at her expense. "You can't run an 'ouse like this for nothing, whatever they think," she would say dolefully. "Annie 'asn't been in work for three weeks, and the Welsh boys 'aven't paid me either. They 'eaves coal on the fire and knocks the furniture about, and the noise they kicks up in the evening is something shocking. And now Mr Sarum 'as got to go in again for the water rate. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Horsehair was bleeding through tears in the worn black leather of the dining-room chairs. In a corner by the sideboard stood a trolley covered with tarnished

heavy silver and dusty cut glass. It was understood that it was kept for best, to replace, on state occasions, the stubby yellow-handled knives. But no one could remember when it had last been used, or explain how it hadn't long ago been taken round the corner to the pawnbroker. There wasn't a mantelpiece or an inch of stair-rail that you could touch without bringing away your finger-tips covered with dust. In my first week I offered to help Mrs Sarum clean the staircase. "Nonsense, girl," she replied complacently. "It ain't dirty. Liza cleaned it a week ago." The streets through which I trailed on my occasional outings might have been cut from the same pattern. As soon as you got off the bus from the centre of London you noticed that the air was colder, or misty as well, if it was cold below. The flowers in the bedraggled little strips of public garden were faded even in early autumn, and the muttering figures on their benches seemed to draw no warmth from the midday sun. In winter the cloak of dust and dirt fell thicker than ever. It was heavy on the barred windows of the silent basements, it clogged on the dark green palings of the asphalt-pathed squares, it covered with a thin veil the leaves of the despondent evergreen bushes.

My excursions outside the rain-coloured world to whose sky I wakened at ten in the morning through a grimy upper window became fewer and fewer. The Soho pubs had lost all their fascination for me. The only one of their customers who was sympathetic when I returned was a woman called the Human Seal, who had a tank act and was also pregnant. I went down to Canvey Island to

my mother thinking I would ask her help. She was then earning her living by charring and weeding a golf-course. "What would you do, mother, if I told you I was going to have a baby?" I began tentatively. "Don't bring your bloody bastards down here," she snapped. I don't think she would have said it if she had known I meant my question seriously. But it takes courage and confidence to trust one's sense of the kindly intention that lies behind the surly words, and I had neither. I said no more, and listened while she told me how she had just had a tooth pushed out by a woman she had called a hermaphrodite when she was drunk.

Victor called round for me once or twice in his car and took me out, but we invariably quarrelled now. He looked at me with the hard, cruel eyes of a torturer calculating just how much pain he can inflict on his victim. It was almost terrifying when I had forgotten it for a minute or two and turned to look at him and saw those eyes. I think I aroused a kind of disgust in him because I was pregnant. The last time we met was a cold, rainy day late in December. He motored me out through the south London suburbs and we stopped at the gate of a building estate. All that could be seen under the headlights was wet bricks and rutted mud and bare bushes; the rain pattered on the roof of the car and splashed on the windscreen. He switched the engine off and, looking straight ahead, told me he was going to marry his other girl and was finished with me. I imagine I cried. I know I accused him of using me as a stopgap. He tried to console me by making love to me.

The little I had left of Alec's money after paying my keep I spent on an occasional solitary visit to a West End theatre gallery. The only adventure I met was on one of these outings, about a month before my confinement. I had gone to see *The Apple Cart*, and after it was over I walked down to Regent Street to take a longing look at the January sale shop windows. I was wearing a cloche hat and a green coat with a scrap of fur round the neck, and looked, I imagine, like a domestic servant on her night out. But I had hardly finished with two shop-fronts before I was stopped by a man. "I'm not that kind of a girl, and incidentally I'm expecting a baby," I told him. The few seconds he was silent seemed so long that I prepared myself to meet a stream of foul language. But instead he burst out: "What! walking about here with an unborn child!" pressed six pound notes into my hand and made off without another word.

Long before this the lodging-house had discovered all about my baby. It came out one morning when Mrs Sarum entered my room at eleven o'clock with a great plate of bread and cheese. I took one look at it and was violently sick.

There was silence for a moment. Then: "You're in trouble, aren't you, girl?" Mrs Sarum asked in her slow heavy voice. "What are you going to do?"

I had sought refuge in the Sarums' house blindly; I had never thought more than a day ahead. Through the featureless weeks it had grown round me like a shell. I had not realized that I must be found out some time. It seemed ridiculous to be afraid of Mrs Sarum, as she

loomed above my bed like a cow that has found speech. But I knew my secret was one that turns the mildest of creatures savage. My one concern, even if I had to trudge the streets once more in search of an obscurer hiding-hole, was to avoid a row. I became humble and apologetic.

"I don't want to bring trouble on your home. I'll go to the Salvation Army," I said, trying not to cry.

Mrs Sarum stood square and solid on the thread-bare little mat. "Ain't you got no family?" she asked.

It was no use thinking of my mother now. I told her: "No. I'll go to the Army," I repeated.

"Rats to the Army," Mrs Sarum said. "I didn't ought to send you away, girl."

"Of course, I know it would mean more work for you," I said hopelessly.

Mrs Sarum's face brightened at the words. They were the cue for which she had been manoeuvring. More work meant more expense, and I was the only lodger who could be relied on to pay my rent.

"That's it, girl," she declared. "You can stay on, but I'll 'ave to charge you extra. I'll charge you three pounds a week. 'Ere, don't be afraid of the cheese." She left the plate by the bedside and stumped out.

The other inmates were delighted at the news. It was the first real event in the house for months. Almost out of memory the most exciting statements that had been made round the dining-room table were "Gwen's out of a job again," or "My boy's bought me

'arf a pound of chocolate lickers," or "Gas is going off to-morrow." "Having a baby's nothing," the lodgers told me. "It's just like going to the lavatory." "Seeing you're expecting, I'll lend you my Ernie," Annie offered. "It does you good to have a man while you're expecting." Unexpected jugs of Burton would appear by the side of my plate at table, even in the middle of the week. That, too, did you good, I was assured. "Poor girl. I suppose 'e took advantage of you. Disgusting," was the only further comment Mrs Sarum made. I couldn't expect any deeper sympathy for myself or interest in my unborn child, for I knew that the thought of sex or anything to do with it filled her with repulsion. "When Tom and I were courting," she told me once of her husband, "we used to go to the theayter and 'old 'ands. And then when we got married, it was all this 'orrible bed business. Oh, this 'orrible bed business."

As my time grew nearer I did my best to save her trouble. I went round to Queen Charlotte's hospital to see if they had a bed vacant. My Woolworth wedding-ring didn't deceive the matron. "Are you one of the poor unmarried mothers, dear?" she asked as soon as I had finished explaining what I wanted. "You poor thing, every one of our wards is full." So a week before the date Mrs Sarum took me to a stout, Guinness-drinking midwife who lived two streets away. We had decided that I should be presented as a Mrs Stelling, wife of a sailor who was away at sea. The midwife showed no signs of seeing through the fiction. She was dressed in deep black, with a jetbeaded shawl, and inhabited a basement with a quantity of dusty potted

plants and a broken-legged cat which she had saved years ago from a trap. "She's a fine, 'ealthy girl," she told Mrs Sarum. "She won't give me no trouble. I'll be round."

Lying in the upstairs room through the long lonely mornings, I was filled with an apathetic despair. I didn't show it, it was no use. I talked gaily enough to Mrs Sarum or the lodgers when they came up. But it all seemed so much more like the ending of life than the beginning. Under the door crept at all hours the heavy smell of the stairway. My window was too far up for me to see from my bed even the highest of the dusty leaves. I wondered whether my Soho companions ever remembered me, or the fluent salesmen of the water-softener company, or the Browns. Existence seemed to have contracted to a dark and narrowing tunnel through which I was being forced against my will. Hopelessly I asked myself how I had ever got into it and whether there could be anything on the other side. I sought relief building cloud castles round the future of my child. He should be the useful citizen that I had failed to be. He should learn dancing very early, so that he should have a graceful body. He should learn to play the flute or the violin; he should become a great musician. He shouldn't be a girl. He couldn't be a girl.

The day he was born I woke up very suddenly at four in the morning and knew it was going to happen. All day I prowled about the house, eating pieces of cake and apple pie, on guard for the first onset of pain. The midwife came at noon and busied herself about the room,

'boiling water on the coal fire, for there was no gas ring, and grumbling in an undertone about the dirt. "The doctor won't allow this," she said, but it was too late for him to have me removed. The pains began. I broke the foot of the bed thrusting against it. In an interval of relief I heard the midwife's voice, coming from very far away, asking whether I would like a bottle of Guinness. The pains became worse. I could not believe I should live through them. I felt my body was being torn to pieces. In the end they gave me chloroform.

He was born at ten o'clock in the evening, a fine healthy boy. Mrs Sarum appeared at the door, looked at him, gave a disgusted sniff and stumped downstairs. There were nine long days of peace. The lodgers climbed up to visit me with little presents of food. And then on the tenth day I came out with measles and was taken off in a black ambulance with the baby to the workhouse infirmary.

The ambulance men carried me on a stretcher, naked except for a blanket wrapped round me, into a reception room where mothers were bringing their children. The almoner read out a list of questions in a dead voice as she scratched with a pen at her desk. "Are you married?" was the second. I said no. Every conversation in the room stopped.

The baby and I were put in a small empty ward opening off the children's ward. For three weeks we stayed there, to the perpetual music of the children screaming next door. An epidemic of mumps and measles was sweeping the district, and boys and girls

were being put two in a bed, catching from their companions whichever of the two diseases they hadn't already got. There was no kind of individual attention to them. They were all washed in the same water, and my baby was brought back to me once with a louse in his hair. Bottles were brought round to the babies' cots at fixed times and removed when they were cold. Very often a child would fall asleep over his, but if it was unfinished when the nurse returned, so much the worse for him. She had no time for any such nonsense as coaxing him into finishing it. She took it away, and there was an end of his feeding till the next distribution.

As soon as I began to get better I was given a pair of calico knickers, a baggy blue and white striped dress and a pair of carpet slippers, and volunteered to help sister with the linen and the children. Pictures of neglect and suffering were before my eyes the whole time. Perhaps the most tragic patients were three boys of one family, who were all suffering from some wasting disease. All three had been brought to the infirmary from a charity home. Their parents, who had deserted them, lived apart, and only met to beget another. The three boys lay in curious tortured positions, on their stomachs or sides with their legs doubled up. Ronnie, the eldest, was very weak and was only kept alive with glucose and water. At intervals through the day he would ask piteously for a drink, but the probationer who was looking after the ward paid no attention. At first I thought it was because she hadn't heard, so I told her. "Oh, he's always asking for something," was all she replied, and she continued her work with

her back turned.

Even the sister, who was kindly and sympathetic, found it difficult to endure visiting day. The children used to scream and cry for an hour after their parents had left. Fat, black-clad mothers would waddle up to the beds with bags of cheap broken biscuits or rainbow-coloured acid sweets which would have been dangerous even to a healthy stomach. The staff had to make a special round to remove the eatables after they had gone.

The mothers were under no illusions about the kind of treatment their children received. "My child was all right before they brought it up to this bloody place," they said to me bitterly, or: "I reckon they find it's cheaper to let them die and bury them than to keep them alive." Coming out of my room one night I saw a weeping mother and a cap-twisting father sitting over the bed of their dying child under the blue night-lights. From one of the chairs came a murmur of: "Poor little thing, now, poor little thing." They sat there all night, without a screen, for all the children to see, till the morning when their little girl died. And every day an undertaker's assistant visited the ward with a black cloth to remove the corpses.

As soon as my period of infection passed, Mrs Sarum came up to see me, wearing odd shoes and carrying a four-penny packet of mixed biscuits and two daffodils. She talked less than usual and averted her eyes from the baby as much as she could. Liza came up too, and so did the Welsh boys, with the potman from the neighbouring pub, who had been a frequent

guest at the shrimp teas. The three of them, all wearing plum-coloured suits, twiddling awkward caps and bearing carriers of sticky buns, conveyed an odd suggestion of the Three Wise Men come to honour a pauper Christ. I noticed that they were all clutching something in their damp hands, and before they left they each presented me with a half-crown. Silver, they explained haltingly, brought luck to a new mother. I gave the money to Liza and heard no more of it.

At the end of three weeks, just as he should have been out of danger, the baby developed measles. They would not believe it to begin with. He had been so strong and well. When I carried him about the ward he had taken an interest in everything. The first time the doctor examined him, he hit him on the nose, and everyone said he was going to be a boxer. And then, as the days passed, he began to shrivel and turn into a peaked little old man. His fine, healthy crying became a sickly whine. I was sitting up knitting a vest for him one morning when sister came in and took a look at him. "I'm afraid he won't live to wear that vest," she said. "I think you'd better have him baptized." So a squeaky-booted parson came and we knelt round the cot and he was christened Brian and the parson recited the twenty-third psalm. I burst into tears when they left the room. I felt I had condemned him to death.

He didn't die till next day. It was a fine spring day, April the first, and three other babies died that morning. I was out of the room when it happened. I couldn't bear to watch so much misery that I couldn't

alleviate. Sister sent up a bunch of Star of Bethlehem, and when I came back they were putting it in his hands and folding them, and then they took him away.

Everything was the same in the room—the bed and the white cot and the curtainless windows; the scrubbed white-wood floor, the cupboard with its pile of yellowing bound magazines, and the wails of the children next door; but I was by myself. I was by myself, and all the anxiety and the pain and the hunting for a refuge and the planning for the future had gone for nothing. All that was left of it was the bundle that was being carried through the echoing corridors to the mortuary to be laid out on a marble slab. It seemed such a monstrous waste of time. I wanted to be angry, but there was no one to be angry with. The probationer came in from the children's ward, shooting her cuffs with an expression of resolute cheerfulness on her face.

"I've just heard," she said. "It's very tragic, and I'm very sorry for you, but we must try and look on the bright side. It wouldn't have had a father, would it, so perhaps it's just as well in the end."

I told her to go.

It was visiting day that afternoon, and some of the mothers spoke to me. "Oh, you ought to go up to the mortuary and see 'im," one said. "'E looks a fair treat." She digressed into a satisfied reminiscence. "Mine," she said, "was laid out in black crape with purple ribbons. I always say there's nothing like an 'igh-class funeral."

I couldn't bear to go back to my room in the dark. I sat up the whole night with the night nurse, talking over the fire at the end of the ward. In the morning

Mrs Sarum came with my clothes in a carrier bag, and with her I walked home through the grey streets into the world.

CHAPTER VIII

I WAS sitting eating egg sandwiches on Box Hill with a trim-moustached little vacuum-cleaner salesman. By my side lay two large bunches of violets.

As soon as I left the infirmary I had returned to my old life as if nothing had happened. I visited the Soho pubs. Their inmates, who had been distant and evasive when I was seeking sympathy, had recovered their casual friendliness. I met Freddie and he gave me a cheque for six pounds. I got a job canvassing for vacuum-cleaners, with Redhill as my territory.

I felt tired and peaceful. I didn't do much canvassing, and the salesman who was working with me seemed in the mood to play truant too. We used to choose for our calls streets that were on the very outskirts of the towns, and work our way out from them into the country. I bird's-nested or picked flowers, or simply wandered aimlessly with my companion up the twisting lanes.

The day of the picnic on Box Hill I began to feel a sharp pain in my chest. It got worse in the afternoon, and next morning I was too ill to get up. The doctor came and discovered that as a result of tiredness and underfeeding and cold I had pleurisy. "Poor girl,

ain't you unlucky?" Mrs Sarum said as she turned to stump downstairs. "One bleeding thing after another."

So I lay in my bed through another fortnight of broadening spring. When I was better I went round to the Eiffel Tower to see if any of my friends were there. Stulik told me that Betty Cousins was ill with jaundice and would like to see me. I went up, and by the bedside were another woman novelist, a Miss Herbert, and a young man.

"This is my brother Richard, from Malaya," Betty said. "This is Sheila. She's just had a baby and it's died. Probably a bloody good thing, too."

Richard was tall, with a loping walk. He had a pleasant, boyish, innocent face and pale eyes. He took to me at once. Betty wanted him to see Miss Herbert home, and all his politeness couldn't conceal the fact that he would have preferred to accompany me. He took my address and made a date with me for two days ahead, and at half-past ten next morning he was on my doorstep with his hat in one hand and a bunch of sweet-peas in the other.

I liked Richard. I felt at once he wasn't out to buy me. That first day he got me a pair of gun-metal stockings and a pair of gloves after lunch, but I knew there would be no account to settle in a fumbling taxi going home. There was a friendly shyness about everything he said or did. He was twenty-five, but he had never made love to a white woman yet. On his leaves from the Far East he had gone about with men friends or with his younger sister, whom he worshipped. I discovered that he was not only in love with me, he

respected me. I think he was the first man who ever had.

Soon we were going out together almost daily. We lunched and dined in a restaurant in Gerrard Street and stuffed ourselves with buns at Rumpelmayer's and he bought me more stockings and clothes and flowers. Then he invited me down to Chiswick to stay with his family.

It was a strange household. Old Captain Cousins, Richard's father, had had a distinguished career in the Navy when he was asked to resign his commission. His offence appeared to me an act of harmless benevolence: I fancy he had given rum from the ship's stores to negroes in the West Indies. He had compounded his pension, and within less than a year had spent it all gambling and drinking. His wife, the daughter of a rural dean, had been accustomed to servants and shining silver and the respect of neighbours. The descent in the world which followed her husband's loss of his position and pay had been too much for her. For a while she had appeared to reconcile herself to the smaller house they moved to; to scrubbing floors, cooking meals, getting up at six in the morning to prepare the children's breakfasts before they went off to school or to work. Then she had quietly gone mad. She began by refusing to eat. She said there wasn't enough in the house. If she didn't economize, they'd starve. Next she started to cut her clothes to pieces and cut off her hair. She said she wasn't worthy; she had committed the unforgivable sin. So she was taken to the asylum, where she now sat picking imaginary rope all day.

Captain Cousins was no sponger, though. When his gratuity was exhausted, he had set about earning his living again, as a rent-collector, and he was still collecting rents. He must have been nearly seventy and he resembled a shrunken old bulldog. He had a bulbous nose and a bald head; he wore a skull-cap in the house to keep off draughts, and he shambled about in a worn pair of carpet slippers. His mouth was pursed over his empty gums, for he rarely wore his false teeth, except on his rounds or at meals. When you went to say good-night to him in the evening, he would be sitting up in bed reading the Bible through a pair of thick spectacles, with a glass of salts, his invariable night-cap, at his side.

The captain made a great fuss of me. He called me his "sprig of peach-blossom" and his "little lamb." He had a wicked chuckle, like an old demon, and the explosive manner of a Colonel Blimp. At table he would rail loudly against his family in a series of detonations. "My son Richard's a damn fool," he would say. "My daughter Betty's nothing but a whore"—a gross libel—"nothing but a whore, but she's a clever whore and she writes damn well. My beautiful daughter Barbara's going to marry a damn fool of an artist who can't keep a roof over her head—can't keep a roof over her head." Barbara, Richard's favourite sister, was running the house then.

Richard and I went down together for a walking holiday in Dorset. We stayed at Lulworth, in two rooms in a hut in the hotel garden. We bought a sheep-dog pup from a farmer and called it Musso. We went for long tramps over the downs in the rain and stopped

at pubs for bread and cheese and beer. Musso would get up early in the morning and drag my underclothes out on the lawn, and bewildered us by his continual changes of colour, from grey, through mauve to yellow, and then back to his original grey again. We hunted for blackberries—it was just before the harvest—and chased each other with nettles and thistles. It was completely innocent and altogether happy. When Richard started to make love to me, he was always interrupted by a fit of giggles. Finally it was time for him to go back to Malaya. Before he left, he became engaged to me. He suggested that I should stay with his father for a while, and knowing my circumstances, he promised to send me twelve pounds a month till he returned and we could be married.

It was understanding of him, and he needn't have done it. He knew the kind of dangers to which my fleeting jobs, with their precarious pay exposed me, and he wanted to save me from them. But he had the forgetfulness as well as the spontaneity of childhood. I don't think he fully realized that anyone existed unless they were in his sight. The objects on which he wanted to spend his pay were always the things on the spot. While we were together, he had talked very grandly about money. He had played with the idea of buying a plane or a Bentley car, or both. But though he sent me his first twelve pounds, the letter which accompanied it was already full of budding excuses. Rubber was going down, he didn't know that he'd be able to keep his promise. By his second letter he definitely couldn't, and he only begged me to keep up with his

family.

I had left Captain Cousins after a month. Mother, who was ill, had given up her bungalow in Canvey Island and come up to town. She shared a bed with me at the Sarums' and spent most of her spare time attending whist drives at the Nag's Head in Holloway Road. There she met her usual train of down-at-heel men followers. To one of them, a nondescript named Elbert, she gave ten pounds to start a rabbit farm. Another, an American, got forty pounds out of her before she discovered that he was spending it on keeping a second woman. There were constant quarrels between us, over my morals and the baby. She reproached me for having let myself be virtually adopted by the Browns, when my place was with her. "Anyway, they bloody soon saw through you," she concluded triumphantly. I was feeling angry and miserable about Richard. I was too young, or too unhappy, to make allowances for his thoughtlessness. I read his conduct in the light of everything I had known of men before. He, in his turn, was going to let me down. At Christmas he sent me ten shillings with a letter of good wishes. That was too much, after his talk of devotion and his promise of support. I stopped writing to him. I didn't trouble to go and see his father. We began to fade out of each other's lives. I went back to the Soho pubs. Betty Cousins was the first person I met. She lived apart from the rest of her family, and only asked casually after Richard. She introduced me to one or two newcomers, among them a nervous little man named Archie, who lived by selling libraries to American

millionaires. "Hang on to Archie," Betty adjured me in a hoarse whisper. "He's just made eight hundred, and he'll be very good to you."

Archie was hardly a romantic figure for a young girl. He had a lean, nervous face, that looked as if it were always about to burst into twitching. His thin, straggly hair descended in sparse wisps over his forehead, on which there was a large lump, and he had small, bony hands with blunt finger-tips. He was forty-two and he began to tell me almost at once about his amorous conquests. To judge from what he said, there was hardly a young or beautiful girl in London, Paris or New York who hadn't yielded to his seductions, but I believed little of his boasting and I think he saw it. He had, however, other topics of conversation. He was an enthusiastic amateur musician, and played Bach on the flute. He had a considerable library of his own. — He claimed to understand Einstein, and had sufficient gift for simple explanation to make me nearly believe that I understood him too. He was attracted by me at once and we were soon going out together almost daily.

Within a fortnight he was asking me to come for a long trip abroad with him. He suggested that we should start with a week or two in Paris, then go on to southern Spain, where he had a house, and end up a leisurely journey on the Riviera. I made it plain at once that I wasn't in love with him and hadn't the least intention of being his mistress. He didn't appear disappointed. I think he only indulged his dream of possessing me when I wasn't there. When I appeared, its vivid colours faded, and he resigned himself to a

hopeful companionship. He had only once attempted to make love to me, in his flat. His whole body was quivering as he laid his hands on my shoulders, and he seemed almost relieved when I pushed him away.

I don't think I was being merely mercenary in accepting his invitation. It wasn't only that I was excited by the idea of the journey. Archie, when he could forget to stare mournfully in my eyes, was really entertaining to be with. I told him that if I came with him, it would be as a friend. He was a man, and didn't know whether that was being fair to him, but that was for him to say. If he cared enough for me as a friend, perhaps he wouldn't feel cheated when I refused to be any more. He said it was no use denying he was in love with me, but he had enough self-control to restrain his feelings. I should come with him as a friend and nothing more. Probably I ought to have known that when a man makes such a promise it is always with the conviction that after the first week he will have persuaded his companion into interpreting friendship along his own lines. I didn't. We packed our bags.

Mother saw me off from an upper window of the Sarums' house. "When you come back I'll buy a revolver and shoot you, you bloody bastard," she screamed down at my taxi. Archie engaged separate rooms for us at a hotel in the Rue de Rivoli. He took me to the Louvre and the Opera. I loved Paris. Even the meanest of its houses, with its shutters and its light colouring, seemed to have an individual face. My only complaint against Archie at first was that when I

wanted to go out early in the morning he insisted on practising his flute. Then, on the third day, he came pattering up to my room for breakfast in his dressing-gown. On the fourth day he implored me to let him get into bed with me. I refused.

"You're like all women," he burst out. "You take everything you can get from a man and give nothing."

I was quite calm. "I've given you my companionship," I said. "Those were our terms, and if you don't like them, I'll go."

"That's right," he said. "You pack up and clear out." He swept out of the room and slammed the door.

I got up at once and had packed within half an hour. I don't think he had meant what he said for more than the moment he said it, for when I knocked at his door he was still not fully dressed. But his dignity wouldn't allow him to go back on his words. If there was to be any reconciliation it must come from my side. I suppose he counted on my enthusiasm for the trip to make me ask him whether he wasn't sorry, but I wasn't going to beg anything. The Dieppe train left at half-past ten, and I had just time to catch it. We didn't say a word to each other in the taxi that drove us to the station. He bought my ticket and put a pound note into my hand. He was quivering all over as he stood on the platform at the window of my carriage. All he said was good-bye.

When I got out at the Sarums' house, I saw mother in the same position in which I had left her. "He's finished with you bloody quick" was all the comment

she made. Before I had gone I had given her my post office savings book, with all the money I had, eight pounds. With it we had planned to start setting up house together when I got back. My last words to her had been an injunction that she wasn't to be persuaded by anyone to spend it. I had hardly crossed the threshold when she confessed that she had given every penny of it to Mrs Sarum, not for rent, which her own small income amply covered, but to pay the rates. "Mrs Sarum asked me for it" was all the excuse she had to offer. I could hardly speak for anger. Never in my life had I been so angry with mother before as I was over that little piece of futility. I think I could have borne it more easily if she had done it out of spite against me, but she had been simply helpless, at my expense, helpless.

My last treasured shred of security had gone, and the sense of victory with which I came back from Paris soon evaporated. Archie sent me a series of increasingly urgent letters. At first he expressed a patronizing hope that our little misunderstanding was over and that he would be speedily seeing me again. Then his tone changed to entreaty. He had packed me off in a fit of impulse and bitterly regretted it ever since. Could I forgive him? Would I come back at once? It would all be different now. I answered none of the letters, and in the end I threw them unread into the fire. I wasn't going through that again. Suddenly it occurred to me that the circle of protestations and pleadings and final recriminations was a stale set piece that I had learned by rote. So many men had stam-

'mered and wheedled and stormed their way through it with me as audience, each in his turn securely confident that it had never been said before. I couldn't bear to hear that weary lesson any more.

I was without money. I was without a job. My only reputable friends, the Browns, had given me up. My mother was worse than useless to me. The one man on whom I had begun to rely was Richard, and he had turned out to be only a child and let me down. My trip with Archie had made me conscious of the opinion that my experience ought to have taught me long ago. However lofty their protestations, men were, in the end, only after my body. They were out to persuade themselves, too, that they had won it by their own unlimited charms. They were out to cheat themselves into forgetting the tricks they had played to get round my opposition. Why should I play up to them any longer? Why should I nurse their vanity? Why shouldn't I make something out of them?

It would be quite easy for me to get another meaningless post. But it would lead nowhere that I hadn't been before. I could see so clearly what lay ahead. The new office, the interested employer, the sympathetic fellow-employees. The keen eye that spotted my defencelessness or the clumsy chance that stumbled against it. The same brazen or timid approaches, the same conscienceless pursuit, the same anxious and calculating purchase of favours with dinners and bottles of wine in cheap Soho restaurants. The same sawdust work, whose only significance was to be a sandwich between sleep and the hot breath of

another rampant male. They weren't prepared to be friends with me. I had wanted friends and I had found none. They only wanted me for what they could get out of me. Why should they have it free?

My sole capital was my clothes, and I had plenty of them. Before even I went to the industrial school, my mother had told me of her life on the streets. She didn't believe in keeping things from children, she said. Now the idea, which I had never thought of much, began to recur insistently to my mind. Sitting over the fire with mother, I told her I was thinking of following her example. True to herself, she couldn't give me the same advice two days running. One day she seemed to think my plan was the height of good sense. "It's a pity to waste your looks when there are plenty of men who'll pay for them," she said. The next day she would hurl abuse at me for a dirty little trollop. The day after, again, she was discussing it in a spirit of mild practicality. I was to go on the streets for a few weeks, a couple of months, maybe, while we saved a little money. Then we would buy ourselves some new clothes and a little furniture and take a cottage in the country where we could keep rabbits.

But I fancy that, even without mother's counsel, spite against men and indifference to them had already made my mind up. One night in early October I paid my bus fare to Piccadilly, stepped off at the Circus and, holding my head in the air, walked down the pavement like a queen. If they wanted me, they must pay for me. It meant so little. I don't even remember the first man who paid.

CHAPTER IX

WITHIN a week it was as if I had never been doing anything else but prostitution. I would go down to the 'Dilly at eight in the evening as I had gone down to the water-softener office at nine in the morning. Except when I stayed with a man for the night, I never returned home after twelve. I rarely had to walk more than ten minutes before making a pick-up, and then I didn't always accept the first-comer. I was attractive enough to be able to choose my own men. My earnings averaged from twenty to thirty pounds a week without my having to make the least effort, for it was only occasionally that I would go out twice in a night. And it wasn't only money that I got. I was so different from the ordinary tart that almost all my clients wanted to meet me again. I looked so little what I was that none of them was ashamed of being seen about with me. To take me out to dinner or the theatre gave the illusion that they had made a conquest instead of buying a sensation. So there were dinners at the Ritz, stalls, gardenias, square-cut bottles of scent, stockings and furs.

I had no quarters of my own, so I would take my men to little short-time hotels in the terraces round

Paddington Station or the streets behind St Martin's Lane. Sometimes in those early days I would wake up with a shock and wonder for a few drowsy moments what I could be doing in the anonymous room, with its red plush curtains and large brass bed. Then the sleeping figure beside me would stir or grunt and realization would invade my mind like a black wave. I would be swept by a desire to slip from between the alien sheets, fling on my clothes and creep out of the place without saying another word. I felt obscurely that my disappearance would wipe away the cobwebs of the night. I never did slip out. It seemed to me that I had chosen my part and now I must play it fairly.

The street-walking itself I never found difficult. It was no more of an ordeal than that of the actress or the mannequin. Like them I must parade across a stage with the gaze of dozens of pairs of eyes fixed on me, like them I must submit to the judgment of an audience. But I wasn't, as I believe an actress is, unconscious of the looks I drew. On the streets you can always feel in the back of your head when you are being followed. You grow to resent that most irritating of all men, the man who trails you for minutes together without being able to make up his mind whether he is going to have you or not. You learn to be conscious when the heavy feet of a policeman are slapping the pavement behind you, and it is wiser to become eclipsed momentarily in a side turning.

I had far more horror of being greeted by one of my fellow-prostitutes than of being accosted by a man. I think there is a children's game that consists in identi-

ifying which animal each member of the party most resembles. There is no place where it is easier to guess the animal behind the human mask than on the 'Dilly. On every hand you see the snifty fox or the weak-eyed, predatory weasel. I walked past the chattering street-corner groups with as much aloofness as a Dame of the British Empire. The smile I switched on like an electric torch when a man approached I dimmed at once as soon as one of them appeared. I had a sick horror that I might by chance be lured into one of their high-pitched, foul-mouthed conversations. Above all I would not let myself believe that I was one of them.

The men I dropped within a few days into accepting and enduring almost unconsciously. The flashed-on smile brought one to a halt: half your attention was fixed on his face while the other half roamed over his dress for evidence of his likely wealth. A worn raincoat and a stammering approach might mean that he was not worth your while to go with, but they might also mean that he spent all his money on Saturday night hunts for street women. With half your ear you listened to the familiar phrases: "You're awfully young to be doing this. How on earth do you come to be here?" You heard yourself utter the habitual responses: "Dreadful night, isn't it?", "I haven't got a flat: we'd better take a taxi to a hotel." All the while at the back of your mind your real thoughts flashed by. "Clicked pretty quickly to-night. Might have been a good deal worse. Won't be long now; may be able to go out a second time. Hope to heaven he won't want to stay the night."

I wasn't a good prostitute. I hadn't sufficient detachment from what I was doing to be able to pretend feeling for my clients. Never have I been so hard and bitter, never have I hated men so much as in those first few weeks on the streets. I gave what I was paid for, but I shrank back in loathing from giving a thing more. I evaded the hurried fumbblings in the dark cab: I had flaming quarrels with men who, not content with possessing me, wanted to make love to me as if I were a mistress and not a tart. It wasn't deliberate. I instinctively flinched from being touched. The act of sex I could go through because I hardly seemed to be taking part in it. It was merely something happening to me, while my mind drifted inconsequentially away. Indeed, it was scarcely happening even to me: it was happening to something lying on a bed that had a vague connection with me, while I was calculating whether I could afford a new coat, or impatiently counting sheep jumping over a gate. When I repulsed them they would take a gulp of whisky from the bedside table and turn over on their side and blow, and the light would go out. In the dark the blowing would turn to a snore, and I would drop into an uneasy doze, haunted by the dread that next morning the snoring thing would wake up and want me once more.

Yet all of them, however pot-bellied or bandy-legged they were, expected as a right to be able to thrill me. Most of them, snapping up my youth like a greedy titbit, coddled themselves in the warm delusion that they were doing something romantic. "When I go to bed with you," I remember one middle-aged prowler

repeating, "I try to think you're my little bride." That greasy pretence of sentiment I found more repulsive even than the most hungry caresses. And the men who professed it expected not only that I should be grateful but that I should leap to return their feelings. I hardly met a client who was capable of taking what he had come for as a matter of fact and then going. If they were not sentimental they were sanctimonious. The first clergyman I brought back, his overcoat hastily turned up to hide his dog collar, tried to convert me with one hand while he made love to me with the other. The second, pushing two pounds across the chest of drawers to me, begged me to go to church next day. Yet I don't know whether I didn't prefer them to the men who tried to raise themselves in their self-esteem by repeating, to themselves and to me, that I was a tart quite out of the ordinary. There was the business man who took me to the Cecil for the night, left in the morning for his office and sent back three pounds ten to the room by special messenger. "If you'd been a common whore I'd have given you half," said the note that accompanied the money. For all their money, I felt superior to those men. They had no emotions, only glands.

Street-walkers, I learned much later, define men by their vices. "I had a very good week this week," you will hear a strident street-corner voice tell a half-circle of friends. "This afternoon I had my high-heel man. Then last night I had a button-boot man. . . ." Or it will be an appraisal: "He's a very nice man, but he's odd, he likes to be dressed up in a nurse's uniform."

But long before I had started to compare notes I had begun to make my own discoveries. There was the man who pursued me, not for my looks, but for my brogue shoes, and when he had overtaken me, asked me to walk over him in them. There was the man who asked me whether I had a pair of button boots, and when I said no invited me down to his house in the country, where he said he had a pair. They were much too small, but he insisted on cramming my feet into them and buttoning them with his own hands. We had a quiet tea together, his eyes continually flitting to my feet, and only afterwards did he ask me to go to bed with him, naked except for the button boots. I could hardly walk for a week after that experience.

I remember a little actor with a bowler hat, a heavy watch-chain and a big moustache. He looked far more like a detective than an actor, but when the door of the short-time hotel shut behind us, he showed no sign of undressing. He became suddenly very nervous, wandered round looking at the furniture, began to speak and checked himself. Then it came out: he wanted me to act a little play with him. He told me the scenario. I must pretend to be a typist on his staff who had been caught stealing. He would upbraid me furiously and I must apologize, break down, snivel, swear I would never do it again, and finally fling my arms round his neck and embrace him, when he ended by forgiving me. The actor often came to see me, and every time the performance had to be repeated, with slight variations.

Much more usual were the men who liked me to

pretend I was their mistress and had been caught in adultery. And stranger were those who wanted to be treated as sick children and ordered about. But all of them were diffident and apologetic about their peculiarities. Once they had brought themselves to admitting them, which took a long and halting time, they would explain that they had read about them in books or that the absurd charades meant something to them because of an incident when they were children. Perhaps, to an innocent mind, they would have been more shocking than naked animal desire. But they never shocked me. My mother had never been able to keep a still tongue in her head, and I had known, almost from a child, that vices existed. I knew, when I went on the streets, that I was going to deal with neurotics. To cater for them was simply part of my job.

Maybe I became what I did, not so much because of the events that happened to me as because of my readiness to take for granted experiences that other girls would have ruled out as unthinkable. Other girls could be seduced, could have a baby, could be deserted by a lover and left without money, and the idea of going on the street would never occur to them. An invisible barrier would stand between them and it. For me that barrier never existed. When I came home from the 'Dilly at night, my mother and I would compare notes on our experiences. Sometimes she was sympathetic; sometimes she would complain that I talked of nothing but prostitution. But there was very little moral condemnation in what she said. She

was merely complaining that I talked too much shop.

From the beginning I was always honest with my men. I had chance after chance to rob them of everything they possessed, and I should never have been found out. It wasn't fear of detection that kept me back, but fear of starting. Once I had begun to steal, I might not have been able to stop. Dozens on the 'Dilly do it habitually, and the men are usually too nervous of scandal to go to the police. It is very easy. Two girls pick on a man, if possible slightly drunk, and shepherd him into a taxi. "Come home with me and my girl friend," says the decoy. "We'll give you ever such a good time. Isn't he a dear?" And she puts her arms round his neck and embraces him feverishly while her companion goes down his clothes. There are cleverer and less obvious tricks than that, which even a man who isn't fuddled won't see through. I knew of a girl who shared her flat with another but invariably went out alone. She would pick on a prosperous-looking man and bring him back. No trace of the companion would be seen: the flat would appear to be occupied by one woman only. If the man showed signs of paying her in advance, the girl would brush the gesture aside and say that could wait till afterwards. That would make the man think of her as a pleasant, uncommercial character. When he began to undress and looked round for a place to fling his clothes, she would point to a coat-hanger on the door. All this time she would be undressing by the bed, as far away from the door as possible. For in the door was a sliding panel, and as soon as she and her man were safely

in bed together her companion would slide it back, remove the wallet from the coat, extract from it almost all the notes, and replace it. His love-making over, the man would dress and pull the wallet out, only to find that it was almost empty. He would protest that he had been robbed: the girl would reply unanswerably that she had been on the bed the whole time. She had never been near the coat. He must have lost the notes or made a mistake. While he was still fumbling she would resume in a high-pitched voice: "What about the money you promised me?" Since she was obviously innocent of any theft, the demand immediately put the man in the wrong. He would pay up and leave with perhaps a pound in his possession, and the girl would join her companion and divide the spoils.

There were men who wanted to prey on me too. I hadn't been walking long when I was accosted, late one night, by a young man. He wore the tight-waisted, purplish clothes of the East End, and the eyelids seemed to hover above the eyes in his sly face as if they were about to shut on you in a trap. He took me to a teashop and over a succession of cups of tea tried to weave his petty spell.

"A nice good-looking girl like you ought to be able to make a lot of money," he said. "But I know what it is with a girl, easy come, easy go. You got a fiver one minute, and next minute you look round and where is it?"

"I know a girl called Sylvia who lives with a boy called Joseph and they live like kings and queens. What it is, he looks after her and sees she doesn't splash her

money about, and so they've always got plenty to enjoy themselves. Now what you want is a nice little flat and some nice boy to look after you. . . ."

I told him to get out for a dirty ponce.

I had my moments of relief. There were the men who picked me up and didn't want to go to bed with me. My ordinary clients, if I ever spoke of these to them, plainly thought they were mugs. But there were more of them than the normal prowlers thought. They weren't only old men. I don't think all of them were merely moved to spare me because I was young. People come to tarts for widely different reasons. They had come for sympathy. They had chosen me because I hadn't got a strident voice or a weasel face. They knew I wouldn't exclaim, as soon as the door was shut: "Come on, dear. Get your things off and let's get it over." I wasn't critical enough to despise them for their weakness or for having nobody but me to come to.

Most of the troubles they had come to pour out were tales of desertion by a fiancée or a wife. The strangest was that of a young man who had married an extremely beautiful girl only to find that she was completely frigid. He was rich, sympathetic and extremely in love with her, and on making inquiries had found that her condition might be cured by psycho-analysis. He had sent her to the best obtainable specialist and controlled himself rigidly till the time she should be cured and come to him of her own will. Then suddenly, at the end of two years, she was cured—and ran off with his next friend.

The days went by, as like to each other as the steps on a moving staircase. Every night I returned to the single room which my mother and I now shared at Mrs Sarum's. We both of us had some new clothes, but where the rest of the money went I cannot remember. We still talked of going down to the country, but nothing was done. I buoyed myself up with day-dreams that the next night or the next I might pick up a rich man who would get me out of it all. I had only been a few weeks on the game when, flipping over the morning paper, I saw an advertisement for shop-assistants for a big store. It might have been printed in bigger type than the column, it fixed my eyes so. I asked myself what, with all my money, I was getting out of the street. I got up late in the morning and the day was wasted: I couldn't see my old friends and I wasn't going to make any new ones. My life was a drab kaleidoscope of secondhand men and dusty confessions, my own contempt and a severance from all human company. I answered the advertisement at once. Forty-eight hours later the reply came. The post, if I was accepted, was one as guide in a new Oxford Street shop, at a wage of forty-five shillings a week. I was interviewed and taken on. Mother and Mrs Sarum—whom she had told long ago of what I was doing—both laughed themselves hoarse at my new job. "She won't stick at that long," they said. I determined I would, to spite them.

But when I started, in November, it was already becoming evident that the new store was doomed to failure. To begin with, it was overstaffed. There were

twenty of us guides, in our uniform of navy blue rep, with gauntlet sleeves, white collar and royal blue band across the breast with the word "Guide" on it in silver letters. We never even began to stand up to the competition of our rivals, across the way and only a few score yards farther down. We were on the wrong side of the street, and though I cannot understand why people should feel drawn to shop on the north side of Oxford Street rather than the south, I have felt it myself. There was a continual air of jumpiness about the more highly paid staff. When they were warned one morning that the Queen was coming to visit the shop, they sent half the girls home to change their white collars. The buyers were all fat blousy women who appeared to be interested in little but the regularity and size of their meals.

I was soon transferred from the guides to the toy department, and spent most of my hours winding up clockwork trains and buses and sending them along the counter. Even there I had my male pursuers. One day I had two invitations to dinner, both from married men. The second was the older and the more persistent, and I tried to divert his attention by showing him every kind of new plaything, from clockwork monkeys to racing-cars. He brushed aside each fresh object I interrupted him with by buying it, and before he left I had sold him £15 worth of Hornby trains alone.

None of my fellow-assistants detected in me anything that separated me from themselves. My best friend was a red-headed girl named Edna, who was as resolutely respectable as she was passionately fond of

dancing. Her worst condemnation of a man was that he got fresh, or of a girl that (in a shocked whisper) she believed she'd gone the limit. We used to go together to dances in a little boat-house up the river, where there was a miniature floor and a yet smaller bar. With us we sometimes took Dickie, the tall, delicate girl at the cash desk. Dickie, who was in love with a speckle-faced shopwalker, an Oxford man, was a responsibility to handle. A couple of glasses of almost any drink would go to her head, a fact that the frequenters of the boat-house soon learned and tried to turn to their profit. Nearly every time we took her down she would get drunk and helpless, and we would go out to the river-front balcony to find some young man pushing her against a wall and attempting to seduce her. We always succeeded in saving her, but in the end we had to give up asking her to accompany us.

The young men who went to the dances were most of them of the kind who talk about their old schools because there is nothing to talk about in their new careers. They wore shabby grey flannels, striped mufflers were flung round their necks with a careful carelessness, and they were enormously self-conscious about their drinking of beer. Half of them ran little second-hand cars, very noisy and always going wrong, in which they would pick girls up on Saturday nights. There were, however, wealthier visitors to the place. On my second evening there I met the two sons of Mrs Dickson, whose famous night-club was then at one of the peaks of its prosperity. We exchanged telephone

numbers and met again next Saturday. "We're throwing a party, chaps; would you like to come along?" they announced when the band finally disappeared after its last encore, and a procession of little cars and taxis raced eastwards against the stream of traffic to their north London house.

With that night I began, so soon as work was over, a new life, a life of tracking bottle parties all over London. The aim of those who took part in it was to drink each night at as many different places and as many different hosts' expense as was possible. The worst tragedy for them was to hear at the end of an evening, from some fellow-guest at the fourth successive flat, that they had missed one possible party on their round. The invitations led to considerable heart-burning at the boat-house dances. Some of the girls, when the first general summons was extended, felt they should ask their parents whether they might accept. They met with stern refusals. The next time the word party was pronounced at a dance they fell into hysterics because they could not go. My mother, who had swallowed with placidity my life on the streets, up-braided me bitterly for frequenting the bottle parties. She said I couldn't come to any good by going there and there was no telling what kind of men I might not meet.

We started often enough at the Dicksons' house, where we foraged for ourselves in the larder, put on the gramophone and bundled the furniture into the corners to continue dancing. Occasionally one of the

daughters would enter to borrow a record, disdainful in oyster satin and perfectly waved hair. They would be giving a party for their respectable friends in another room, a House of Lords to our indiscriminate Commons. More disdainful still were the two night-club dancing partners into whose flat we burst one evening at seven o'clock, quart bottles of beer in our hands. We had intended to start our party-crawl in their rooms, and they, the expensive aura of an afternoon in the Row still about them, were just changing out of riding kit. That night ended with a bathing-party in a snowstorm on Wimbledon Common. I and my girl companions bet the men they wouldn't go into the pond. We plunged in in our under-clothes, breaking the ice to do so, but they shiveringly refused to follow our lead. So we put on our evening dress over our dripping things and ended the outing drying our stockings round a coffee stall urn.

It was a stupid and empty world, full of leaden repartee and vacant laughter. The young men clumped heavy-booted towards their bearish seduction between pots of beer and roars of "What cheer, chaps?" And all this time at the store the uneasy rumours were putting out their tendrils. Completely strange assistants, passing through from other departments, would stop to hand on the latest intelligence. "D'you hear what they're saying? The place isn't paying and they're going to cut down staff. That means the bullet for someone." Then, at the end of the week, some of the pay packets would be fatter than others. Their recipients would turn pale and open them to find two weeks' wages

and a typed note giving them a week's notice. Every week there would be more of the double packets. It became a Friday Suicide Club game guessing whether one's own packet would be among them. So many were dismissed that it began to be evident that this was more than a reduction of staff. The store must be closing down. It was. I got my own notice in the largest batch of dismissals, just before Christmas.

There were tears, embraces, shrill cries of "Good-bye, dear. I hope you get a new job soon. Promise you'll write to me." But most of the girls had homes or were engaged. The loss of their jobs meant the breaking up of a pleasant companionship. It didn't put their backs to the wall. It did mine. Mother and I had just moved into a small flat in Finsbury Park that had to be paid for. I couldn't afford to be out. I went back to the streets.

I remember a bottle party just before the store closed. I took my dentist, who was very handsome and a good dancer, and also, I don't know why, a little girl who lived in the flat beneath mother and me. This prostitute was half-Spanish, stocky, black-eyed, fierce-tempered and always chewing gum. She got very drunk and told the dentist she thought he liked his bit of miggy. He took me aside and told me how he loathed prostitutes. Momentarily, I felt quite a superior being.

A fortnight later, by one of those chances that sometimes emerge from nightmare into life, I ran straight into the dentist in Piccadilly. He halted, saw

in an amazed flash what I was about, and burst into melodramatics.

“Good God!” he said. “What a tragedy!”

CHAPTER X

"I HOPE you don't mind my asking," a hard voice said, "but are you a gold-digger? Don't be ashamed to admit it if you are. I'm a bit of a gold-digger myself."

I was sitting on the floor in a corner of one of the parties with a common little steely-eyed blonde woman who had been introduced to me as Alice.

"Alys, I spell it, of course," she explained, when we were left together. "And really my name is Alys von Hamm. There's a bit of a mystery about me, I don't mind saying. All I can be certain of is that my father was a German count. But the first thing I can remember is being brought up in the country by a couple who were paid to keep their mouths shut. And I wormed it out of them that they weren't my father and mother, though they let on to be."

Alice, as I soon discovered, was a prostitute, though an expensive one, and a fluent and unashamed liar. She took me round to her flat and told me more of her history. She had a child in the country, it seemed, its father an Indian prince out of whom she had got £30,000 in money and jewels. She had travelled all over Europe and America and spoke eight languages

fluently. Among the famous figures she met had been Hitler, and she made it appear that their conversation had been a long and intimate one. The walls of the sitting-room were plastered with pictures of film stars, inscribed "Alys, with love from So-and-so," "Alys, with many happy memories from So-and-so." The photographs were all Woolworth prints and the stars seemed every one of them to employ the same handwriting. Alice insisted, in clipped phrases, that she did all the best things with all the best people. She talked of skiin', fishin', swimmin' and shootin', but she couldn't walk half a mile without complaining of her feet and couldn't swim at all. When I met her she must have been well over thirty, but there was no means of knowing for sure. She would give her age as the lowest figure her companion of the moment seemed likely to swallow. I have known it drop as low as twenty-two with fuddled young men. To me, she was twenty-five.

I should have known that Alice did few things without an eye to their cash return. But I took it at first as an act of pure friendliness when she suggested that I should get a flat in the same building as hers, off the Edgware Road. She said it was less lonely for girls to be together, she had more friends than she could handle and she could put me on to a lot of nice men. In fact, she counted on drawing commission from me for her introductions and saving money on wages because I should share her maid. The flat was expensive for its size, bedroom, sitting-room, bathroom and kitchen, all small. It cost £4 10s. a week. But I was tired of trailing home in the evening to Finsbury Park

from the 'Dilly. I was more wearied still of the snoring old men who insisted on spending the night with me once they had paid for the room in the little Paddington hotel. With a flat of my own I could turn them out when I liked. I accepted Alice's suggestion and moved in within a week.

Alice was quite pitiless with her clients. Where she had reason to believe they were married, she would worm their addresses out of them and use them for blackmail. She can't have been more than five foot three, but the biggest man couldn't stand up to the cold glint of her fishpond eyes when she was angry, or even pretended to be. Once, indeed, the terror of her temper not only saved me from a client who went wild but got out of him far more money than I could ever have done myself.

He was an officer off a warship at Portsmouth, a quiet-mannered dark man with a nervous smile whom I had picked up in Half Moon Street. Joking about experiences he'd had, he said he heard some people got a lot of kick out of whipping a girl. He'd never tried it himself, and it would rather amuse him to one day.

"You mean you want to try it on me," I said, I recognized the tremulous jocularly in which a man will cloak a request he daren't make openly.

He admitted he did. He promised eagerly he wouldn't hit hard. Since he seemed quite gentle and sober, I went over to Alice's flat and borrowed a cat-o'-nine-tails she kept in a drawer.

No sooner was it in his hands than he lost all control of his desires. It seemed as if the power of hurting

me had intoxicated him in a moment. He whirled the knotted cords above his head and lashed out till the blood streamed down my back and I screamed with pain.

Alice burst in on us in a sea-green silk wrap, her eyes as hard as agates and her speech clipped to the bone. The man backed up against the fireplace, the whip still in his hands.

"How much did he give you?"

"Only two pounds."

She turned to him. "You look as if you think you'd bought her for a slave. What's your name? . . . Job? . . . Ship?"

He answered without a protest.

"Wait here till I'm dressed."

She left the room and I heard the sitting-room key turn on the outside behind her. The officer mumbled apologies. I could see he was on the point of a panic-stricken inquiry what she was going to do. Within five minutes she was back again, dressed, perfectly made up, and a bag in her hand.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" she asked.

He muttered that he'd never gone in for that kind of thing before, he knew it was wrong, he'd read about it in a book.

"You'll have to give her some more anyway."

He pleaded he'd given me all he had.

"Yes, I've heard that one. Go down your pockets."

He turned out everything he had, and Alice went over it. There was no money there.

"Well, you'll have to pay up or I'll get on to your captain. Any preference? Good. You're staying at a hotel, I suppose?"

He named a hotel off Regent Street.

"All right. You can rake up some cash there. We'll come down with you, to collect it. And mind there's no funny business.—Sheila, ring for a taxi."

We drove down to the hotel at once. The man, still pale with fright, collected another six pounds. A pound of it Alice and I spent at once drinking double whiskies at the Criterion. The rest we split. She could always frighten men that way.

But she was no more merciful to her friends. Through her flat passed a succession of young men who lived on her. She bought them all camel-hair coats, paid their driving fines and the hire-purchase instalments on their cars and went away with them for weekends. There was little affection in the relationships. Alice regarded the young men as a necessary stimulant. When the hard drinking and late nights they had to indulge in with her had fuddled their conversation and bloated their looks, she threw them away pitilessly, good for nothing now but to prey on some other less hard-bitten woman. One of the youths stole from his own father to buy Alice presents. He broke down in sobs when she told him she had no more use for him. It moved her no more than if he had been a casual, first-time client.

It was a long time before I came to realize that prostitution and blackmail weren't Alice's only resources. One of her most regular visitors was a yellow-

haired, ratty little man named Eric. I would always hear of his appearances in the same way. Alice would ring up from across the passage, never before 12.30 in the morning. "Eric's coming round in half an hour," she would say. "He's got some jewellery. Do you want to buy any?" I would go over and Eric would ring, punctual to the minute, carrying a selection of rings, bracelets and necklaces in a little paper bag. His eyes would shift as you watched them, his clothes were as precise as a tailor's dummy, and he was very proud of the paper bags. He never used any other receptacle except when he brought clothing, and then he would have an untidy brown paper parcel under his arm. The only purchase I ever made from him was a pair of silk nightgowns and two sets of Indian silk pyjamas, which he sold me for fifty shillings the lot. But he gave me a pair of marcasite earrings in the form of little baskets set with emeralds and amethysts, and a necklace of pink seed pearls.

Eric's jewellery was by no means trash. A pair of earrings he sold to Alice for £5 she had valued at Hatton Garden at £80, and I am sure she talked of few of her bargains. One in the morning seemed a very strange time for an honest trader to call, but it wasn't for months that I realized that all the property was stolen. I wasn't interested enough in Eric to inquire how he got it, and I didn't want to be badgered into buying things I didn't want. But one night I went into Alice's flat when he and she were burning out the lining of a Persian lamb coat he had brought, because it had a monogram. Then I gathered, little by little,

that Eric was a cat burglar and that Alice both acted as receiver for him and used her knowledge of her richer clients' habits to plan his thefts.

Eric too, in the end, fell a victim to Alice's hardness. He got himself into some minor monetary scrape, and she lent him £4 to see him through it. As security for the loan, he left behind an imposing gold hunter watch. Alice, who would have bitten every sovereign she was given if they had been current in her day, tried to wind it as soon as he was gone. It wouldn't go, and a jeweller told that the necessary repairs would be more than it was worth. The watch, in fact, was valueless except as metal, and Alice told Eric that unless he repaid the money at once she might do something that would be very unpleasant for him. He paid no attention: possibly he was dissatisfied with the prices she was paying him. Shortly afterwards he was caught on one of his burgling jobs and sent down for several years. It may, of course, have been pure coincidence. But I am convinced, since Alice often mentioned Scotland Yard officers as among her acquaintances, and knew at least one detective, that she was a nark as well as a receiver. I think she shopped Eric, out of spite.

Two months after I had moved into the flat I had almost stopped going out on the streets. In those eight weeks I had picked up a circle of men who had taken my telephone number, and now the bell was ringing at intervals all through the afternoon.

My regulars came from the most different worlds. George, a fair-haired poetic youth with a twisted nose and an unhappy mouth, had just come down from

Cambridge and was learning to spend his fortune. We usually met in a Piccadilly Hotel at six in the evening and he would take me out to dinner and give me gardenias and boxes of fifty Turkish cigarettes. George called me his "young Artemis." He wrote me long letters, stuffed with comparisons from Greek mythology, and many of them stopping on the very verge of a proposal.

Graham can't have been more than twenty-one when he first picked me up in his car in Bond Street, but he made his living as a punter at the dogs. He had a face like an angry bulldog, with hard brown eyes, one very much larger than the other, and eyebrows that met in the middle. Apart from the dogs, his chief recreations were drinking and driving down the by-passes out of London at enormous speeds. Graham had a train of loose-lipped followers who filled the flat on Saturday afternoons and turned it into a betting office. He was never without money: one night he stayed with me he locked up £200 in a tin box which he put on the mantelpiece. I stopped seeing him when a girl in the flat below, another prostitute, told me she had been keeping him and he had knocked her about.

My principal standby, though, was Matthew. Matthew was a rich man of forty, partner in a Levant merchant house, whose life had been broken when his wife ran away with an Italian gigolo. He was tall and square-shouldered, with a clipped moustache and the face of an intelligent Guards officer. You would say it was the face of a man who couldn't be hurt, but it was impossible to be with him long without seeing that

his wife was scarcely ever out of his mind. He was a good talker and had read a great deal before she left him, but now he preferred to seek a busy oblivion in a round of cocktail parties and dinners with people he despised. Matthew had a house in Corfu and one in Surrey, with a stable of horses. I went out with him three or four times a week and he would buy me clothes, pay my rent and give me pocket-money. One day alone he came up to the flat with £30 to get me a new evening dress; when I fell ill he settled with the doctors and nurses. He made a condition that I should see no other man but him. That, of course, I broke, but I grew to be really fond of him. I didn't resent it even when he laughed at my mother, which I didn't like men to do. She called at the flat one day, very red in the face and carrying on her arm a wicker shopping-basket full of cods' heads for her cats. He said she drank and looked like a char. I only lost Matthew when he was taken ill with kidney disease.

One of the visitors of those days has stayed on in my life and played the biggest part in wrecking my only chance of respectable happiness. Yet no one who saw him would dream that Andrew was capable of exercising an influence on anything or anyone. When I first met him he was a dried-up forty-six, lean, nervous and perpetually talking about his stomach. His collars were always loose on his neck and his hat perched on the top of his head. His thin lips and beaked nose gave him the air of a nervous bird of prey, and he peered at me with kindly china-blue eyes.

Andrew was sleeping partner in a large Edinburgh

business in which all the work was done by his elder brothers. I fancy he was regarded as the fool of the family. He went regularly to the office and sat in a director's chair, but I don't think he was permitted to take any important decisions. And every three months or so he was encouraged to descend on London for a fortnight. I believe that the necessity of making contacts was the pretext for getting him out of the way, but Andrew spent most of his afternoons and evenings prowling the West End streets in search of tarts.

It seemed that in me he had found his ideal, for he fastened on me like a weasel and was soon assuming the airs of a proprietor. "You're such a bright and bonny young thing," he said. "You're so different from the other girls I see on the streets." He told me his story: he had always lived a sheltered life and never had the courage to approach a real woman. "I was very fond of a girl once," he confessed regretfully. "She was a doctor's daughter. We used to play golf together. I was very fond of her, but I don't think she was fond of me." And then he crept back into his shell.

Andrew was quite free with his money then. He would take me to see Shaw and Galsworthy plays at the theatre. In his conversation he would often quote, not only Burns, but Gibbon and Jane Austen. From time to time he would talk about marrying me and settling down in a little house. But it was always a day-dream from which he swiftly awoke when he turned to think what his brothers and respectable Edinburgh would say. Sometimes the day-dream would

be prolonged beyond his life. He would declare that he was planning to marry me on his death-bed, when I should inherit a third of his estate under Scots law. "But then," he went on, "if I were to leave you my money, you'd only buy fur coats and go abroad wasting it with your young men." In fact, I believe he was haunted by the fear of his brothers' disapproval pursuing him even on the farther side of the grave.

For there was a trace of furtiveness in all his enjoyments. Time and again he would break off a conversation to plunge into some anecdote about the underworld of secret vice. "There was a very eminent man in Scotland," he would say suddenly, his voice falling almost to a whisper. "You would know his name if I told it you. He drank. It was very pathetic. They found out he committed sodomy with his gardener." I imagine that the dusty little tales were a substitute for the excitement he couldn't get in real life, even with me. Because his lecheries—I suppose it is true of most men who pick up prostitutes—were never geared to his personal existence. They were a separate quality, almost shocking in their intrusion when a whole afternoon's companionship had nearly made me forget he wasn't a friend. He would flatter me about a new dress. He would nag me because he had found a half-bottle of whisky on the side-board, declaring that I was taking to drink. He would have been talking over the fire for hours, and then he would give a furtive look at his watch which would signify, more plainly than the words he daren't utter: "Hadn't we better have bed?" And the mechanical jerk of the transition

gave the whole day a colour of inhumanity.

It wasn't long after I met Andrew that I acquired my first ponce. It happened through an excursion to Brighton. Alice's reigning young man at the time was a youth named Godfrey. When she first took him up he was slim, alert and attractive. At the end of a few months he had soaked himself into a fat, lazy and drunken slug. When he had reached this stage, he was imprudent enough to ask for an increase in his allowance, and Alice promptly told him to go. She knew he was persistent and would probably hang about the flat seeking forgiveness, so she suggested we should go down to Brighton for the week-end to be out of his way. "You don't mind paying, do you?" she asked me. "I haven't a penny in the world till the banks open on Monday." Alice was an expert sponger, and had already borrowed from me quantities of cigarettes, drinks, and even underclothes and bed-linen. But she knew I was accommodating, and we went down together at my expense. We stayed at a flat whose proprietor owned a café frequented by Brighton's underworld.

Thirty-six hours of sea air made Alice feel so young, she said, that she decided we should spend the rest of the season at Brighton. On Monday she went up to London to arrange for the disposal of our two flats, promising to return in a couple of days with some money. A week passed; she neither came nor replied to my letters and my own resources were beginning to run short. In the evenings I was going for company to the café, which was round the corner. It had an upper room fitted out with a battery of gaming

machines, and a large lower room where the pansies used to meet and dance with each other. I had never met them in the mass before and they didn't repel me: I liked them. It was difficult to believe at first that their make-up and their mincing walk and their exaggerated manners among themselves weren't part of an elaborate game, which would be dropped next minute. But when I had got used to their antics and their vocabulary I found them rather restful companions. They didn't regard me, with a gourmet's appraising eye, as a tasty joint of meat. I could talk to them freely and be certain that dreams of a bedstead didn't lurk behind a proffered friendship. I danced with one or two, particularly a high-spirited youth of twenty named Vernon, and learned something of their life. Those of them who didn't exist on their wits or on rich men visitors were employed in humble positions as errand boys or liftmen. They had no ambition. They put all their intelligence and enthusiasm into their peculiarity. After the café shut I would go round with a bunch of the young men to the flat of a Mrs O'Leary a wealthy and billowing Australian widow. Mrs O'Leary didn't treat them as gigolos. She was immensely maternal, very innocent and had never had any children, and she regarded them as a kind of overgrown family. I don't believe she even realized that they weren't entirely normal boys.

In Mrs O'Leary's flat whisky was waiting on the side-board, the gramophone was kept going till four in the morning, and the visitors, not content with the free drinks and smokes, helped themselves to pocketfuls of

cigarettes when they left. Alice was still silent, my rent remained unpaid and my landlord's patience was exhausted. Returning from shopping one afternoon I found my luggage piled in the corridor outside the flat door. Vernon helped me take it over to Mrs O'Leary's in the evening, and it was only when we got there that we discovered that we had carried off with it, by mistake, an imitation tiger-skin rug that belonged to the house. We took it back to the café next morning as soon as we were up, but the proprietor greeted us in a fury. He had already told the police.

"So you've thought better of it, have you?" he snarled, as the whole café listened. "Got the wind up, eh, my little thief?"

Vernon amazed me by daring to protest. "I don't think that's quite the way to speak to a lady," he said.

"Lady, huh! Bleeding prostitute! I've got plenty of time for a straight whore, but a bleeding crooked whore I've got no use for."

Vernon looked as if he wanted me to believe he might fight, and I dragged him out and borrowed the money from Mrs O'Leary for my fare back to town. Evidently he felt he had established a claim on my gratitude, for that very night I heard from him again. He rang up my Edgware Road flat from Victoria and said he had come up from Brighton and had nowhere to stay the night. I asked him round and half an hour later he appeared, with a friend.

The friend was a wooden-faced lout with a blabbing lower lip and long arms that hung inertly

down his sides as if his hands had been lumps of lead. His dull eyes, heavy with a stupid craftiness, wandered slowly round the room in search of objects to eat, drink, smoke or steal. His conversation, when we sat down to table, was confined to surly sentences expressive of his wants: "Can I 'ave another sausage?" "Got a bit more bread?" "Can I 'ave a bleedin' cigarette?" It was difficult to understand what held the two together, for Vernon was all gaiety and life. He took an interest in everything; he danced about, criticizing the decoration of the flat and making almost dictatorial suggestions for its improvement. "I like the stuff of these curtains," he said, "but can't you see they ought to be yellow? Yellow, my dear, yellow! It's a crime they aren't yellow! And that lampshade positively makes my hair stand on end. Can't you see you want a black alabaster bowl?"

They slept on a sofa and an arm-chair in the sitting-room, and next morning Vernon approached me timidly. He said he had no money and nothing to do, would I mind very much if he stayed on a few days while he looked for a job? I told him he could stay a week, but his friend must go. I was certain that before the week was up he would have cleared the place of all its valuables and disappeared. Vernon must have found that the charms of that friendship had exhausted themselves very rapidly, for he agreed at once and the lout left, his last words: "Can I 'ave a bob for a packet of fags?"

At the end of the week, Vernon was still without a job, and I told him he must clear out. His reply

was to burst into tears and cry the whole night. He was so helpless that I couldn't bear to turn him out. I extended his period of grace for another week, and from that time, of course, he knew he was a permanency.

I never felt of Vernon as a sponger, though all the time he was with me I kept him in money, clothes, food and cigarettes. Perhaps that was because he never took me for granted and became, as most spongers do, a mere lazy mouth. I think he was at least as anxious to please me as he was to be kept by me. It was impossible to quarrel with him, for he would always slip under your anger with a joke or an irrelevant repartee. He took Alice's measure at once and answered her back pertly when she sneered at him. When she left the flat he would call out after her: "Won't you take the blankets with you?" Her borrowings from me stopped dead while he was there.

No one but one of his men admirers would have called Vernon good-looking. He was shorter than me and slim, with small hands and feet. He had the glistening brown eyes of a pensive cow, plucked eyebrows, curled eyelashes and a bronzed face whose seaside colour was carefully maintained with the aid of sun-tan lotion. His hair, a streaky brown, he had evidently tried to dye at some time, and he would spend minutes before the mirror looking for blemishes in his complexion. When we went out together I insisted that he shouldn't use paint or powder. "I'm the prostitute here," I told him.

He didn't ever reproach me with my profession, as some ponces do. His attitude was more that of one

colleague to another. In the evenings he would take three-and-six from me and obediently go out to have" dinner at a restaurant. Just before midnight he would ring up to know whether he might come back. "Having a bad time, dear?" he would say. "Turn the old bastard out. Cut the legs off his trousers. If I were a bit bigger, I'd turn him out myself."

Coiled in decorative poses on the sofa he told me his story. His mother, he said, lived in Kashmir, though he never made up his mind whether I should believe him if he told me she was an Indian princess. He had been brought up at Tunbridge Wells by an aunt and uncle and sent to a London public school, but his downfall had come before that, when he was seduced at his prep. school. The headmaster, he said, had called him to his study to row him and had offered him an apple. Vernon had made a joking reference to the apple of Eden, and the head, instead of caning him, corrupted him.

His presence led me into quarrel after quarrel with Andrew, who had taken to calling at the flat at eleven in the morning without telephoning, his hat over his eyes and an unfurled umbrella on his arm. "I wish you wouldn't get mixed up with yon young man," Andrew complained, in the precise tones of a disappointed governess. "He'll only drag you down. Now if you could marry a nice young man with £375 a year. Or even if it was only £275...."

I don't know how long our odd relationship mightn't have gone on in that twilight world. Vernon was all for regularizing it. He proposed to me

frequently, though I never rejected him without feeling that the proposal should have come from my side. I owe him one debt. He was always courteous to me: his pressure took the form of tears. But he helped me to understand what I had never grasped before: how a prostitute whose existence is brutal enough without that will put up with the bullying, greed and jealousy of a ponce in return for nothing but the permission to keep him and go to bed with him. In a life where sex is merely a commodity, casually traded over the counterpane daily, the faintest spark of personal affection grows to be worth a fortune.

And then, one morning at half-past ten, the maid knocked at the door of my darkened bedroom.

"There's a gentleman to see you, Miss," she said. "Says his name is Mr Cousins."

CHAPTER XI

RICHARD sat on the end of the bed running his hands through his hair. "It's all very unfortunate," he said, "but it can't be helped.

"It's really all my fault," he said. "I ought to have taken a chance and married you at once. Or I ought to have kept up your allowance. You're the only woman I've ever loved."

He got up and paced about the room, moving ornaments on the mantelpiece, half-drawing the curtains and closing them again.

"Tell me about them," he said. "No, don't. It's all over now. I'm going to look after you.

"We must think what we're going to do."

It was two years since Richard had seen me. For more than a year he had dropped out of my mind. I hadn't imagined I should ever see him again. But almost his first act on landing from Malaya had been to hunt up my mother and discovered my address.

It was a shock when his name was announced. But it was a pleasant shock. I liked Richard. He wouldn't have come back to me if he hadn't meant to marry me. I could never have kept the truth from him. It was better for him to see it for himself at once than

to be put through the ordeal of listening to a halting, drawn-out confession, waiting from second to second for the inevitable but unbelievable worst. I told him all that the flat and the maid and my mother hadn't already told.

He heard it like a puzzled schoolboy learning for the first time, in embarrassed bewilderment, of the facts of life. What had happened to me didn't join on to anything he knew. His shoulders were humped, and then he squared them. I knew he had decided, as the schoolboy would, to forget it all and remember only that I was to be pitied for what he had forgotten.

"Look here," he said, rising. "I'm much too early, I see that. Like the old bull in the china shop, what? I'll come round again at half-past two and collect you, and we'll have a real talk."

Vernon reappeared cautiously when he heard the flat door shut. He had picked up his clothes and slipped over the fire-escape to Alice as soon as the maid knocked.

"Who's that?" he asked.

I told him about Richard. "He wanted to marry me once and I think he still does," I said.

"You'll be a bloody fool if you do marry him, dear," Vernon declared. "Are you in love with each other? He may be, but are you in love with him? You're only asking for trouble. It won't last three years. Far better marry me, or even blackmail that old bastard Andrew into putting a ring over your finger. You do at least know what you think of him—and he's rich. Can you guess what Richard's thinking now? I can. Thinking what a damn fine fellow

he is to be treating you just as if nothing had happened."

Vernon's intuition was much too acute about any kind of emotional muddle. I wanted to keep, for a day at least, my warm illusion. I told him to shut up.

Richard came at his half-hour. We took a train out into the country from Marylebone and walked through the wet lanes of the Chilterns. We had tea and home-made scones behind the leaded window-panes of a cottage with roses round the door. He told me he had lost his job in Malaya through the slump in rubber, but that didn't depress us. He had found a new way of making a living, in England. One of his father's friends was a tea-merchant, and he was going to peddle tea from door to door in London. He calculated that he could make £500 a year out of it, and then we could get married.

I didn't say no too sternly. I was content, for that afternoon, to lean back and dream for a few hours that I was secure. My responsibilities to Vernon, to Alice, for the rent, seemed to dissolve into the air with the steam that rose from our clothes. I drifted back across the bridge of years into that time, only twenty-four months ago, when it had been conceivable that I should marry. Twenty-four months, after all, wasn't so long for a girl to be engaged. I let myself believe, while he scribbled them on the back of an envelope to lend them conviction, the little sums that Richard was working out of the money he could make from his tea-peddling. "Let's see," he said, "better be cautious. Well, suppose half the johnnies I call on take the stuff.

They can hardly take less than half a pound to start with, probably a pound, and a good many'll take more. Suppose I work eight hours a day, and how many calls can I make in an hour? Well, with my commission it looks as if I couldn't make less than a tenner a week. We'll be in clover." I didn't let my own barren experiences of canvassing rise to contradict his cloud-calculations, proudly spread out before me in that man of the world voice that was really the voice of a school-boy of the world. I didn't repeat, more than an unemphatic and swiftly forgotten once, that it was impossible for me to marry. Richard's nice, I said to myself. The world feels a warm and friendly place to-night. Let to-morrow give to-morrow's hard answers.

They had to be given. For Richard came to see me the next day, and the days after, and asked me, not in a day-dream but as a sober question, whether I would marry him. I told him no. I tried to make it as easy for him as it could be, but it had to be no. He hadn't started to sell his tea yet. He had almost no money left of what he had brought back from Malaya. To keep a roof over my head I must go on having men. I put it to him brutally that when he had gone they would come up: I let him hear the telephone calls I received while he was there. I asked him how he would like to feel that his wife had been everybody's woman, how he would like to meet with me socially a man who had had me as a prostitute. I told him he thought he would be able to forget what I had been, but he never would. What would there be to reassure him, as the ordinary husband is reassured, when

the first spark of jealousy appeared, as it always does appear? Wouldn't I have to endure almost as much, knowing that I was never trusted? And was his self-control so strict that he could be certain, the first serious quarrel we had, that he would be able to resist ending it with the taunt, "Prostitute! I picked you up out of the gutter"?

I wasn't being high-minded. I doubted myself whether the marriage could be made to work. I wasn't in love with Richard. I knew my own impressionability and I had no certainty that I could be faithful to him. His love for me, presented and acknowledged, was a warming compliment. If I were surrounded by it permanently, it would turn to a resented burden. I should revenge myself on him for it in every petty way that one person who lives with another can. I had always been fair to men, and it wasn't fair to treat him, or love, that way. Marriage, for people who aren't rich, is usually a final arrangement. When the odds were so heavy against us two succeeding together, wouldn't it be better for us both if he would try and forget me?

But Richard continued to come. He repeated all the old phrases. He said that everything would be changed now: he said his love was enough for two. Alice and I had decided, because our rent was too high, to move into a flat in Lisle Street. He helped me take my possessions round in a cab. That move meant the dismissal of Vernon, who had been hovering on the edge of my emotional tangle like a malicious chorus. He knew we were going to change our quarters, but he

couldn't believe he wasn't to be provided for in the change. When I told him he must go, he burst into the most whole-hearted fit of tears he had yet achieved. I almost think it was genuine, but I wasn't in the mood to be touched. He guessed, and began to complain of a quite unendurable toothache. He lay on the sofa moaning softly and declaring that no one cared for him. I gave him ten shillings to go and see a dentist. He saw that his reign was over, packed his clothes, still moaning, and went.

It was in the Lisle Street flat that Richard first met Andrew. Andrew was already bunched up in an arm-chair, with his hands stretched out to the gas fire, when he came in. Richard wouldn't take his coat off and stood very stiffly with his elbow on the mantelpiece. He answered Andrew's questions with curt phrases that dismissed each subject as it was raised. I have never seen dislike worse concealed. In the end he froze the little man, and the two pounds in his wallet, out of the room. "Well, I suppose I'd better leave you two happy young people together," Andrew excused himself as he retreated.

"You ought to get all you can out of that old bastard," Richard said as soon as the door shut. "He ought to pay five pounds merely to look at you. It's simply Beauty and the Beast." But he went on to propose again, and I had to tell him no once more. Maybe I said it more firmly, and for the first time he believed I meant what I said. Maybe he was realizing for the first time of what kind of unwished encounter my life was made. He didn't cry, but he nearly did. He

went out into the December night white and distressed. I could hardly bear to let him go.

Andrew was either too accustomed to contempt to notice it or too insensitive. When he called next day he praised Richard with all the patronage of a privileged relative. "Yon's a straight young man," he said. "He's no' one of them flibbertygibbets that dangle around you sometimes. He'll look after you well." I remembered Richard's white face and began to wonder whether I wouldn't go back on my decision. Andrew had promised me once that he would give me a hundred pounds if I married a man he approved of. Obviously he would give it to me now, if his promise was sincere and Richard would agree. I went round to Richard's club and asked for him. He came into the hall a little unsteady and very melancholy from the beer which he had been soaking ever since he said good-bye to me.

"Richard," I said, "if you still want to marry me, you can."

He didn't understand for a moment. He stood, swaying a little on his feet and looking at some object behind my shoulder with a fixed gaze. Then the separate words jumped together in his mind and his eyes swept down to my face and he saw that I meant them. He took my hands and danced me unashamed round the hall-way.

We drank many pahits and spent many minutes before we sat down to discuss seriously when it was going to happen. I told Richard at once of Andrew's offer; I said that if he wanted to marry me soon he could only do it by taking the hundred pounds. I

don't know what I wanted him to say. Very likely I should have admired him more if he had refused it and set about planning some way of his own to get what was needed. But he didn't mind. He was too much of a schoolboy to see that when you accept tainted money you accept something else too. "We'll fleece the old devil," he said. "Time he was fleeced. We'll spoil the Egyptians, what?"

And so we turned to talk, interrupted by my jokes and Richard's fits of giggles, of where we should live and what furniture we should get with Andrew's present. I proposed that instead of chairs we should buy a set of commodes. Richard declared we must have a piano at all costs. "It lends tone to a flat," he said, "and besides, you want to practise your music. You shall play me to sleep in the evening." Finding a flat, it seemed, wouldn't be difficult. Richard's sister Barbara, now married to her penniless artist, was living in one in Hampstead and there was a vacant set of rooms, very cheap, in the same block. Richard would see to that and I would meet Andrew again and get his blessing, and his cheque.

A few days later my two men met and the bargain was concluded. Neither of them thought of giving me a week's rest before my wedding. Up to the very last I smiled and stripped and lay down with my two-pound or three-pound or five-pound callers. The night before the marriage I cried all night. I saw that I was only walking from one kind of miserable confusion into another.

Andrew had bought me the black coat with the

blue fox collar in which I went from the Lisle Street flat to the Henrietta Street Registry Office in the morning. It was a large, bare room, its walls fluttering with notices. I caught myself wondering why a warning that spitting meant a forty shillings fine hadn't been included among them. The registrar, in a big black tie and broad-winged collar, had a parchment face like the legal caricatures that decorate old-fashioned solicitors' offices. A Malayan friend of Richard's and my cousin Alec were waiting as witnesses. Richard didn't like Alec, I could see. The affectations that had been charming and boyish in him those years ago in the country had hardened into mannerisms too rigid to laugh at. Five years of growing responsibility in the City had drawn over his face the wooden mask of the self-conscious executive. And yet, as I stood before the polished desk and the thin trickle of words went over my head, I could see behind the black jacket and the striped trousers the open-shirted figure in the sunlit garden, I knew again suddenly the early morning thrill of finding and carrying away to secrecy one of those long, warm letters. I felt abstractedly that it was really Alec I ought to have been marrying.

We lunched at the Monico and drank a great deal of wine. We had tea at a Bayswater hotel with an aunt of Richard's who had always, he said, been good for a tip when he was small. The hotel had the air of an institution for the old. It was full of malacca chairs and guests who would have been better described as inmates, they had stayed there petrifying so long. The aunt received us in her room, a picture of the Christ

Child over her bed and an amethyst cross round her neck. She remembered that Richard liked crumpets, and as we rose to go, she put an envelope into his hand. "Don't open it till you get home," she said. We opened it as soon as we got into the street. It contained a five-pound note. So we had a vast dinner with the Malayan friend and went to the cinema, where the two dissolved in laughter over an Oriental joke which they refused to explain to me. And then Richard and I went home.

Our flat consisted of a large studio, a kitchen and scullery and a bathroom, for which we paid a pound a week. We soon discovered its disadvantages. There were bugs in the house, all the fires smoked, and the unique occupation of the fat, lazy and rusty-black-clad landlady, who lived below, was talking scandal. There was hardly a time you descended the stairs when she wasn't established at the foot, exchanging confidences with one of her cronies and all the world else who happened to be within earshot. As you grew closer a mounting spiral of sibilants would reach you. "I never was one for gossip," it would run, "and I dare say to them that knows her Mrs Cousins is a very nice lady. But what I will say is. . . ." You reached the bottom and the stream suddenly diverted into a broad and oily smile and a fat "Oh, good morning, Mrs Cousins."

But I was very happy in those early days. Richard didn't go to work for the first week. He said he couldn't have enough of being with me. He was more alert and boyish even than when I first knew him. We behaved like a pair of children; we were always chasing

each other about the flat, I pretending alarm and hiding behind doors, and the game ending in helpless giggles. Richard was boyish too in his bashfulness as a husband. It wasn't till ten days after we were married that he first made love to me.

By that time he had begun to go out on his round peddling tea. As I had feared, his commission brought in far less money than he had expected. The week varied: sometimes it amounted to as much as five pounds. But there were other black Fridays when there was only two pounds or even thirty shillings coming into the flat. I tried to help as much as I could. Of course I did all the housework myself; once or twice I went out on the rounds with Richard. Regularly I left the flat in the afternoons with a sack on my back, to comb the Heath for the firewood we couldn't afford to buy. I even took, for a short time, a job as charwoman with a Russian Jewish family at Hornsey. I got the place from mother, who had had it herself and found the work too hard. I was supposed to be there from nine till four, at the rate of sixpence an hour, but I was often kept till seven or eight with only an extra sixpence for the overtime. The day began with polishing the family silver, swelled to the dimensions of a royal treasury by the wedding presents of the sons who lived in the house. Then there was the cleaning of the massive furniture, ponderous gate-legged tables and three-tiered sideboards covered with ornamental scrollwork that might have been designed to accumulate dust. And at one o'clock Mrs Kaplan, sitting down with her children to a lunch as solid as its

table, would call upstairs to know whether I would prefer a boiled egg or a kipper to eat in the kitchen.

The charring didn't last long, and I took to bar-bola work to occupy my time at home. I made table-cloths and embroidery. I went over and looked after Barbara's babies while she was shopping and helped her to wash up. There was a cinema round the corner where seats were only sevenpence in the afternoons, and I often went there. And as the evening drew on I would sit before the fire drawing charcoal caricatures of Richard on the tiles of the fireplace to amuse him when he got home.

We quarrelled, of course. We quarrelled too often once those first honeymoon days were over, and I think most of our disputes were my fault. Sometimes I had reason for complaining. Richard, for example, bought a second-hand car for five pounds and would bring spare parts into my newly cleaned scullery and oil them there. But more usually I made trouble with him simply because he was so kind to me. Perhaps he treated me too much like a pet or an expensive toy. He wouldn't only bring back flowers at night. He would give them to me and then sit and stare at me ecstatically for minutes together, without saying a word but maybe: "How lovely you are!" Perhaps I should have responded to his love more gratefully if he had been able to wrap it up in an off-handed cheerfulness. For love is a strong drug to those who aren't accustomed to it. I had always known it as something fleeting and insecure, for ever about to abandon me. And when Richard so plainly offered me his love as a

gift that was solid and lasting, I couldn't resist the temptation to hurt him and hurt him and go on hurting him simply to persuade myself that it would endure.

Neither of us was used to economizing, and our poverty began to weigh more and more heavily on us. Finally, in desperation, Richard wrote to Andrew explaining our circumstances and asking him whether he would help us again. The reply was a wire: "Have finished with the pair of you." It would have been happier for us if he had.

But only a few days later he relented. I still ask myself whether it was friendliness that moved him or an obscure idea that he might turn our pennilessness to his account by buying me once more. He came down from Scotland to London and called, not on us, but on my mother. He asked her whether I went out much, if I seemed happy and well, and particularly whether I had any clothes. She wrote to me of his visit, and next time I went to see her, he was already there.

He was more nervous even than he usually was. He must have wanted to feel his way and discover on just what terms I was with Richard. He began by saying that I was a clever girl and it was a pity that I should settle down so early to become a dull drudge of a housewife. I ought to have a career, he said.

"Yon fine husband of yours has not been all the success he said he would," he grumbled. "That five hundred a year of his looks very much as if it were all going to end in talk. I'm thinking he should never have married a fine girl like you unless he was certain of keeping her the way she should be kept."

I might dislike being poor. I might quarrel with Richard. But I wasn't going to hear him talked of like that. Andrew swiftly changed his tack. He said that every man must expect difficult times to start with when he embarked on a new profession. Still, that was no reason why his wife should suffer for it. He was a friend of Richard's and an old friend of mine, and he didn't like to think of me getting shabby and living without anything to look forward to. It would cost him very little to help me, and it might make a good deal of difference to me. I had always been a good mimic and I had the makings of an actress. Would Richard mind if he paid my training fees at a dramatic school and let me have a ten pounds a month dress allowance, so that I could keep up with the other students?

I talked Andrew's proposal over with Richard. "By all means accept it if it'll make you happy," he said. I do not think he would have been so formal if he had really been pleased; I fancy it was his fear of losing me if he didn't make me happy with his own small means that induced him to agree. But I saw no hidden threat behind the offer. Andrew, once I had shown him I didn't mean to have my husband discussed, had been so friendly and paternal. I had always cherished at the back of my mind the dream that I might one day be an actress. Now I was to challenge the dream to meet reality, and I wasn't afraid of its facing the challenge. I felt only the slight tremor which is the cloak of confidence that brilliant morning of early summer when I first mounted the stairway of the

Oxford Street building. "This is Mrs Cousins," Andre introduced me to the principal, "who wants to get o the stage and earn her living because she has a delicat husband."

The school was called the John Thornham Drama tic Academy, but John Thornham, who was supposee to teach modern comedy, rarely appeared. When he did pay one of his infrequent visits, he spent the greater part of it sleeping in an arm-chair. The real work was done by Angela Marx, a brilliant Shakespearian actress. There were twenty pupils, most of them the children of well-off families, and only three of them showing the slenderest sign of talent. How the rest came to be at the school presented an almost insoluble riddle. Families, of course, create legends about their members. But could the most fertile imagination have conceived as an actor the wooden young man with the tooth-brush moustache who was incapable of reading a paragraph of the *Daily Mail* with expression? Yet he dutifully appeared every morning and ploughed his way through his set lines of Shakespeare without once raising or lowering his intonation. It was easier to understand the presence of Juanita, the Spanish girl with the huge beak of a nose and the little whisper of a voice. With a long-fringed shawl over her head and castanets in her hands she must have been an outstanding figure in an after-dinner drawing-room charade. One could hear the admiring exclamations stepping on each other's heels: "But, of course, Juanita's *made* for the stage," "It'll be a *crime* if she isn't trained." Francine, fair and lovely, had obviously been sent because it was only

necessary for her to appear in a public place for every voice to be hussed. She seemed to move in a trance, as if dazed by her own beauty. When rehearsals were on, she would sit in a chair, gazing into space, and had to be woken when her lines came. She only became fully alive in the dancing class, and then she outshone any of us.

About most of our work there hung the irresponsible atmosphere of a school play. Little groups, unoccupied for the moment, would be whispering and tittering in a corner of the stage while the scene of the moment droned on, and there was usually something to titter about. There was Mab, for instance, only fourteen years old but already earning four pounds a week in the chorus and determined to rise out of it. She came from a theatrical family, had a constant flow of stage stories and boasted of being on the most intimate terms with half the reigning stars. There was Susan, who had an ear that seemed quite incapable of appreciating any difference of intonation, and held up a rehearsal for ten minutes before Angela Marx could teach her to say "I will" with the accent on "will." There was Margaret, young and shy and pretty in her shantung frocks, fingering, whenever she spoke a line, a string of beads which broke at least twice a week. Then the scene would be drowned in laughter and Angela Marx would say: "Now we will stop and have a conversazione while Margaret picks up her beads."

In spite of its carefree air and the high proportion of pupils who possessed no qualification for the theatre but rich parents, the school had turned out a dozen

actors and actresses who were now making their names. I was looked to to become another of them. Angela Marx liked me and was very pleased with my work. I had a good ear and could imitate almost any kind of accent after a few minutes' listening. I stood sufficiently outside myself to be capable of playing character parts, and I was usually given those of old women in the pieces we handled. Half-way through the term three Egyptians appeared at one of our rehearsals, fat darkish men with iron-grey hair and clipped moustaches. They said they planned to start a repertory theatre in Alexandria and were looking for fresh talent to import, and they picked on me at once as just what they wanted. Miss Marx said without enthusiasm that she would look into the matter if they would give her their references to verify. I went home flattered as I had never been, and was dismally disappointed when, after a week, it appeared that the whole project had fallen through. Perhaps I should not have been flattered. Very probably "theatre" was not the exact word the Egyptians had in mind. But I received a more solid compliment at the end of the term. I was given one of the principal parts, Miss Janis, in the play, *London Wall*, which we performed on our own stage before a small audience of exclamatory relatives. And it was more than a compliment; it was an opportunity. For it had been arranged that next term we should take it down and act it at a little theatre in the provinces.

The next term never came for me. Quite early I had begun to see it mightn't. Richard had had a serious talk with Andrew before I went to the school—as

serious as his repulsion for him would allow. "Look here," he had said, "I put you on your honour not to molest my wife. She's had her faults, I know, but she's had a very hard life, and we want to get her out of it." But almost every evening the little man would be hanging about in Oxford Street outside the school, waiting to meet me when I came out. He never summoned up the courage to mount the stairs, and at first the encounters were quite innocent. He would take me across to a Lyons', give me a cup of tea and ask me about my work. I only found the meetings irksome because I had to be at the school at 10.30 in the morning and would have preferred to hurry home and finish my housework. But as the summer days grew longer and filled with haze, I noticed that more and more often a silence would fall on his conversation, a silence that I was obviously intended to help interpret by a sympathetic question. Little phrases came up to the surface of his talk that showed which way his mind was tending. "Quite like old days, isn't it?" he would say, "you and me having a friendly cup of tea alone together." Or "I've never known you more lovely, even when I had you all to myself." At first they were mere isolated sentences, like the wet crests of rocks momentarily exposed by a reflux of the retreating tide. And then the tide became less hesitant and the crests took form and linked together into a reef. And on a blazing July afternoon, with Oxford Street as barren and dusty as the Sahara, he bent over to me across the tea-table and asked: "When can I have my bridal relations again?"

I told Richard what had happened. His only comment was: "Dirty old bastard! You tell him where he gets off." He seemed oddly lacking, both in protectiveness and in imagination. It didn't seem to occur to him that my past still exercised an influence on me, and that I might ever give in to Andrew. Maybe he was chiefly concerned to make more money, so that I should soon be independent of the little man. Meanwhile my unsupported struggle went on. Once he had gathered the courage to make his declaration, Andrew felt that the ice was broken. It required no more daring to repeat it every day, and daily, in a different form, he repeated it. At first he counted purely on my pity for him to achieve his object. He was so lonely and unhappy, he said; he had no one in the world but me. Couldn't I make a little sacrifice for him? When he saw that had no effect, he tried to play on my gratitude. He was doing a great deal for me, he said. He was giving me what my husband couldn't give me, the chance of a career. He would do anything to make me happy: wasn't it only fair that I should do something in return? Richard had so much of me already. How would he be hurt if a crumb or two was spared for him too? I told him I was grateful for his help, but a kindness that bargained for its return wasn't kindness but commerce. And then he turned to open blackmail. He declared that if I didn't give in to him he would have to cut off my allowance. It wasn't spite, he explained carefully. It would be very different if he were a really wealthy man. But he wasn't. He had to have a woman, and he couldn't afford to keep two.

Of course I should have said no at once and finished with him. But to be an actress was a dream I had comforted myself with so long and that was so near achievement now. I thought I should be safe if I temporized. "Don't ask me now," I told him. "Perhaps some time, but you must wait." The half-answers only encouraged him to persist and to ask for a more definite reply. "When is this some time to be that you're talking of?" he would ask. "Can't you see how impatient you're making me, dear? It's bad for my health to be kept on tiptoe like this." Our meetings became a grey succession of wearying wrangles, with Andrew pleading, "Can't it be this afternoon? There's no time like the present," and I obstinately refusing. I came back home in the evenings worn out and exasperated, and Richard got the worst of my temper. "If this is the effect that the school is having on you, don't you think it would be wiser to drop it?" he asked. I was beginning to feel the same myself, but when it was he who put the question, it became unbearable. In his mouth it brought home to me immediately how tantalizingly near I was to realizing my ambitions and yet how far.

The term ended, and Andrew got Richard's permission to take me and my mother down for a holiday in Essex. He was to rent us a bungalow, and live himself in another not far off. We had not settled in before he renewed his entreaties. He would visit us every other day, and the talk would go round in the same threadbare circle. My mother imagined that she had fallen in love with a jazz-band conductor who

lived with his sluttish wife two bungalows down the row from us. We must be in and out of their dishevelled home, its dresser piled with unwashed dishes and its wardrobe hung with unwashed clothes. The sluttish wife must make herself at home with us and borrow our gramophone records and use my make-up. My mother must tell them all her past life, and mine as well. And Andrew's high-pitched pleading must go on as a pitiless chorus: "Won't you let it be to-day? Nobody will know."

That too was over, and we return to London, the jazz conductor and his wife as mother's lodgers in her Finsbury Park flat. There was only a week or two left till the school's new term started. Andrew renewed his pressure. The time had come for me to decide, he said. And one afternoon I found myself, bewildered and resentful, bowling along in a taxi towards one of the short-time hotels in Paddington. By my side sat in silence the withered little figure, afraid to betray by a word the private joy he hugged lest at the last moment I should change my mind again.

It happened twice. It happened three times. But it was no easier for me to yield the second or third time than it was the first. There was the same struggle, the same bitterness, the same bewildered self-questioning what was the good of it all. I might have been going, time after time, through the mean pangs of some obscene birth. I saw the bright hopes of my new career stretching before me, interrupted at the same hour every afternoon by the piping voice pleading for its weekly ration. And suddenly I knew it must end.

I told Andrew I couldn't accept his kindness at that price. I didn't listen to his wordy explanations. I told Richard, as soon as he came home, just what had happened. He turned very pale, rose from his chair and slammed a couple of doors. Maybe it was self-indulgence on my part to tell him. Confessions often are. I didn't think it would hurt him unbearably, or I would never have confessed. Neither of us talked of it again. Andrew disappeared, and we went on living together, as friendly as we had ever been.

But my last hope of building my own future was broken. I must let events build it for me.

CHAPTER XII

I STOOD on the wet platform of St Pancras Station, a great bunch of sweet-peas clasped in my hands, and watched till the tail of the train vanished down the misty line.

Richard had left me to seek his fortune. It was just eighteen months since we had married. The profits of the tea-peddling had never come up to his hopes. And meantime the price of rubber, whose slump had lost him his job in Malaya, had recovered with the introduction of the restriction scheme.

He had no post, nor even the offer of one. But we could scarcely be worse off than we were at the moment. So he had talked things over with his friends from the Far East and resolved to go out and seek a job on the spot.

The enterprise wasn't as foolhardy, for a married man, as it seemed. Richard spoke fluent Malay and Tamil, which few Englishmen in Malaya do. He had many friends in the country. He knew the rubber industry. He was man who, if business really picked up, would be useful in many capacities. The money for his voyage out and for my support he had raised by securing an advance on his mother's will. He was to

make me an allowance and I was to stay on at the flat till he was settled enough for him to be able to send for me. My mother was to come and live with me to keep me company.

He cried most of the night before he left at leaving me. On the boat-train platform groups of leather-skinned men and horse-faced women were slapping each other's backs and shaking hands with exaggerated heartiness. The sight steadied him. He slipped into the frame. I felt it was then, and not in our last kiss at the carriage door, that he had really parted from me.

So I went back to the empty flat. It felt empty, as if, while we had been sobbing in the taxi and searching for insufficient sentences on the platform, the windows had been thrown open and a gigantic vacuum-cleaner had sucked up all the eighteen months Richard and I had been together. I almost resented the presence of my mother, bunched over the fireplace sewing and looking up to inquire meaninglessly, "So you've seen him off?" I snapped an answer. I wanted to be by myself. I had grown fond of Richard. I had grown to depend on him—how much, I hadn't known till he had gone. Now he had left me alone. I was frightened to look into my loneliness.

By the next day we had fallen into the routine of living together. We sewed, we read books from the tuppenny library, we walked on the Heath, we bought fish for my mother's cats and liver for my dog. We went to the seven-penny cinema in the afternoon, and sometimes to the pub round the corner in the evening.

The first news from Richard began to dribble in through the morning letter-box: coloured postcards with half a dozen lines of pencilled scrawl. "Here we are at Gib," they read. "Fine voyage and quite a jolly lot aboard." Or "Port Said at last. Only a fortnight more and we shall be there."

On the Saturday before August Bank holiday I was leaving the house to take the dog out, when a little man outside the door halted me. "Gorblimey, lidy, buy a peanut," he said in a rich Cockney. He had a tray of small paper bags slung round his neck, and though I don't like peanuts, I bought six-penny-worth out of pity. The hawker couldn't have looked more pitiful if he had been made up for the part. He wore a crushed check cap and threadbare clothes, his shoes were down at the heel and out at the toes, and his hands and his face were thick with ingrained grime. For all that, he hadn't the air of a man born to destitution. His grimy face was a typical film face grown too old to attract any but occasional small-part jobs. He had brown curly hair, narrow, watchful blue eyes, piano-keyboard teeth, neat hands and feet and a muscular body. As he spoke he flashed on a smile that recurred a little too regularly to be genuine. But perhaps it was only a smile of courage, defying the world that had downed him to make him cry out.

That, I discovered later, was what he meant it to be.

I asked him a question, and he admitted he had been on the stage. His mother, he said, was a well-known

actress. "You might not think it, lidy," he said, "but I'm 'arf a Frenchy. Me great-grandad's brother, 'e was one of ole Napoleon's marshals.

"You'll excuse me, lidy," he broke off. "Tride's calling. See yer again. I'm up 'ere for the 'ole 'oliday."

I told my mother about him when I got back. We both thought that it would be a kindness to invite him up for a plate of cold meat and a salad. But the landlady's tongue would never stop wagging if we did. It was impossible.

For the next three days I found myself pursued with bags of unwanted peanuts. Whenever I left the house, it seemed, the little vendor was stationed outside. He would sweep off his cap with an exaggerated bow and press a packet, or even two packets, on me. "Nothing to pay, lidy" he insisted. "I couldn't take any money from you. You've got a kind fice. They're lovely nuts." I didn't eat the nuts and had no reason to open the bags, so it wasn't till the third day that I discovered that almost all of them contained little notes addressed to me. They were protestations of affection, rendezvous for the evening, compliments on my appearance. I began to understand the look of disappointment that had grown on the little man's face as I calmly accepted without comment each new bag of nuts.

The final note, on Bank Holiday Monday, contained an invitation to come out on the roundabouts when the day was over. I didn't see why I shouldn't accept. The little vendor would probably be amusing

for an hour, and when it was over I should never see him again. I told him yes.

He called at nine, but when we went up to the Heath, the roundabouts were already being dismantled under hissing flares. So we made our way down to a coffee-stall in Camden Town, and as we descended the hill he told me the story of his life and woes.

Of course, he was neither a peanut vendor nor a Cockney. He held a steady job at a store, was married, with four children, and spoke naturally in a pleasant voice that had only a faint ring of the halls. The "peanut act," as he called it, was merely a way of satisfying his stifled ambitions to get back to the stage. He carried it out every Bank Holiday and most summer Sundays, and usually managed to make thirty shillings or two pounds out of the week-end. "God in heaven," he exclaimed, as I marvelled at his profits, "it isn't the money. Don't you understand that I've been an actor, and once an actor, always an actor? The artist in me won't let me wear out the seat of my trousers on an office stool."

His name, he told me, was Jack, and he came from a stage family. "It's in the blood," he declared, "it's in the blood. Why, d'you realize that for this peanut act of mine I get up at five in the morning and rub grime into my eyes and my hands just to be certain I look the part? And even then I'm not satisfied. An artist is never satisfied."

Jack had joined the Army during the War at the age of fourteen. After it was over he had gone to the

States with a music-hall act, out of which he had made a good deal of money. But he had fallen in love with a girl, spent half his earnings on her, and, when she threw him over, dissipated the rest in desperate gambling. So he entered the French Foreign Legion, served three years in Africa and was invalided out with an honourable mention. On his return he had met his present wife, a music-hall actress who was with child by another man. He had married her out of pity, and now they lived a cat-and-dog life together in a house at Wanstead, with the one alien child and three of his own.

Told in his manner, with perpetual incursions into Cockney, to keep in practice, his story sounded a chain of flat lines. But Jack possessed the art of making even the truth incredible. He showed me his discharge papers, both from the Army and the Legion. They were all in order, and he hadn't deserted. For the moment he was less concerned to impress me with the hardness of his past than with the bitterness of his present. His soul, he said, was being torn by his work. His colleagues he referred to as "these frightful pieces of work." The latest unhappy incident in the store had occurred when one of his superiors had consulted him about a bottle of scent.

"Don't you think it's a bit aromatic, old boy?" Jack had tentatively suggested.

"What d'you mean?" the superior had demanded.

"Well, aromatic. I mean, it smells rather strong, doesn't it?"

"Then why the hell don't you say so?"

Jack had been brooding over this piece of managerial coarseness for weeks. "I think that was a bit dire, honey, don't you?" he asked. "Christ Almighty, it was dire!"

"Then my little budding children, these pure little flowers," he said. "What's to become of them being brought up in this awful Cockney accent? Their mother does her best for them, I know, but she's a trial, honey, she's a trial. Ah, what it is to be a father and have a father's heart!" We had only been together an hour, but he went on without a break to question me about my own private life. How many men had I had, he asked. Himself, despite all his temptations and difficulties, he had always been faithful to his wife. He didn't think there could be much good in a woman who had once committed adultery. "After all, what does the Bible say?" he demanded. "We have the Bible, honey, and the Bible was set down for us to believe."

Almost in the same breath he hinted, though in a form of words so involved that it took some unravelling, that he would like me to take him away for the weekend. And I fancy he vaguely suggested that we should take a house together, at my expense, and that when I had sailed for Malaya, he and his children should stay on in it.

At last he had mounted the homeward tram to Wanstead and I was slowly ascending the hill. All I felt for the little man was a careless pity touched with contempt. He was one of those characters, I realized,

who are comedy itself to remember but intolerable to be with. He couldn't utter a sentence that wasn't a pose. His vanity about his youth was childish. He told me he was thirty-odd, and then hurriedly obscured with his thumb the line giving the date of birth when he showed me his military discharge papers. He was evidently a born sponger, without even the grace to let an acquaintance mature a little before he started his sponging. I reached the front door and found I had forgotten my key. It would only mean more talk if I wakened the landlady. I wandered up on the Heath and lay down under one of the mountain-ash trees. The milkman roused me at seven o'clock. My mother's first words when I entered were: "How many times have you two had it on the Heath?" I told her to go to hell. With that little man!

But it wasn't the last I saw of Jack. Every Sunday now he came up with his tray of peanuts. His favourite station seemed to be outside our house. He pressed me continually with invitations to come down to Wanstead and meet his wife and children. The more wearied I grew of him, the more my mother took his part. "I can't see why you're so horrid to Jack," she said. "It's not his fault if he's poor and has to come up here selling his peanuts. And he likes you, anyone can see that. I think he's charming, and look at all the adventures he's had." In the end I accepted, if only to silence him. He called for me on a Saturday afternoon. When the tram conductor climbed the steps to us he showed a slight embarrassment. "You don't mind

paying, do you, honey?" he asked. "You realize I've only got four pounds a week, and I've got my little ones' to feed. I can't take the bread out of their innocent mouths." A wave of repulsion swept across me, and I paid for both the tickets.

Dirty milk-bottles littered the shelves and tables of his two-storey home. The brass was unpolished, the floors had obviously been given no more than a hasty sweep for weeks. Stale crumbs were working their way into the entrails of the one comfortable chair, and the windows were streaked with grime. When you saw his wife you asked yourself whether she was attractive or whether she merely might have been five years ago. She had a strident, music-hall look. There were grease-spots on her dress, her hair straggled in wisps over her ears, and her hard blue-grey eyes proclaimed that she too thought of herself as a martyr. I watched her put the children to bed. She gave them fish and chips, without plates, on the blankets, and cheap broken biscuits, with brightly coloured boiled sweets to suck themselves to sleep. "Haven't you ever wanted to get out of this locality, dearest," I heard Jack ask her, "with the tramlines and the smoke, and take a little cottage in the country where we can bring up our dear ones?" "Bilge! I'm quite content as I am," was all she answered. "Anyway," she went on, "I'm the worker here. There's no need for you to bring your fine lady friends down to moan about how we live and patronize us."

That, he told me as he took me back to the tram,

was a very mild reply for her. Usually she would throw a plate at his head. I could easily sympathize with her. Two martyrs in a house makes misery. But for all the little man's pretence and high-flown language, there was something solitary and frustrated in him that touched me. He was so helpless, I couldn't escape seeing it. "My soul is in the country," he said. "My heart is in art and literature. But I never see the country, and I never read a book." He had a bicycle; I asked him why he didn't go out on that. He said he was too lonely. I understood. And once you have seen a sponger's point of view you have become his hypnotized victim.

So we began going out into the Kentish woods together on the fine Sunday mornings. We lay under trees and ate sandwiches and picked flowers. He rhapsodized on his new-found happiness, and I felt the warm glow of self-conscious charity. We went farther afield: at his suggestion I took him for a week-end to Brighton. He introduced me to his aunt, a frail old lady who painted quiet little water-colours and wrote poetry in the style of Ella Wheeler Wilcox, full of flickering fire-sides and friendship's touch. With my mother we took three weeks' holiday together in Essex.

Now that I was growing fond of Jack, my mother's attitude towards him began to change. Perhaps she was jealous of me and wanted him for herself. But as soon as he had left the room she would start to suggest, with much pantomime of secrecy, that he was merely out for what he could get out of me. She would even

break into hysterics as she declared that I was wasting all Richard's money on a good-for-nothing sponger. "Poor Richard, poor Richard," she complained. "He hasn't deserved this. Only I really care for him." When she was alone with Jack, on the other hand, she did her best to suggest to him that I had been a prostitute.

I had not been feeling very well in Essex. A week after we came back to London, at the beginning of October, I collapsed in the street and was taken to hospital with appendicitis. Jack called at the flat to inquire about me. He ate hugely and talked without ceasing of his stomach and his affection. "God, how I love that girl!" he sighed. "Got a little more trifle, mother?" Mother hated being called mother. It suddenly came over her, she declared, that it would be the best thing for both of us if she were to break off our relations. The easiest way to do it would be to reveal my past. Without waiting to be asked, she poured out the whole of my history.

I don't believe she had been inspired by any motive of regard for me. I imagine that she had merely felt lonely in my absence and had been unable to resist the temptation to empty the entire contents of her mind into the first available ear. "She told me," Jack described it afterwards, "like sausages coming out of a machine." Two nights later she got drunk and repeated the story to the landlady and the woman next door, interrupting her recital only to pass round the more ardent of Jack's letters to me, which I had left behind in one of my drawers. When Andrew reappeared from Scotland, she

informed him of my relations with Jack, and she gave a detailed account of my doings to Captain Cousins.

I knew nothing of this on my hospital bed, though I guessed something must have gone amiss. The day after my mother had told him my story, Jack came to the hospital on his bicycle and left behind him a seven-page letter to me. It consisted almost entirely of reproaches about my past. I wasn't aware that he had learned of it, and the fact that he had, and the tone of the letter, threw me into a dangerous relapse. The sister saw what had been responsible, and though Jack called every morning till I was out with an equally bulky letter, the budget of plaintive correspondence was kept for me till I left.

It was an unfriendly world that greeted me. "It'd have been a good thing if you'd died under the anaesthetic" were my mother's first words when I entered the flat. Her drunken confidences had made it impossible for us to live there any longer; we had to move to Finsbury Park. Her indiscretions to Captain Cousins had led to the calling of a kind of family council, its theme whether or no Richard should be told of my unfaithfulness. Richard's former employer, the tea importer, had been the only person there who had stood up for me. "Sheila's a damn nice girl," he had said. "Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. I won't stand for this marriage being broken up." In the end he had carried the day, but the family's trust in me was gone. And I was finding it more and more impossible to live with my mother.

There were sordid quarrels with her, quarrels with Jack, quarrels with the two of them together. For Jack was coming to see us more often now. He had left his wife and children, though he was still supporting them, and had moved into a basement room off Seven Dials. The days clicked round like a meaningless musical-box over a perpetual ground-bass of snarling voices. There came a night when the three of us were hammering at each other and a flash of intolerable insight stopped me in the middle of a retort. That shrill scream I heard was mine, I realized. To be snarled at I could bear; to be made to snarl myself I wouldn't. I walked out on them. I walked the streets for hours. In the end I found myself outside Jack's basement in Seven Dials. Thoughtfully I descended the steps: I meant to stay the night. I stayed six months.

The basement consisted of a single small room with a kitchen smaller still. The solitary window looked out on a blank wall. On it fell, through a grating, the shadows of passers in the street. The floor was lino'd; one of the dark green walls was covered with a nest of shelves. A double divan bed, a white hardwood table, two hard chairs and one easy-chair composed all the furniture. Jack wasn't supposed to be living in the place, for it had been condemned by the council for human habitation. He had rented it for some nebulous occupation connected with the stage, and a brass plate on the door, bought with my money, a little later proclaimed it as Jack's "Studio."

When I rose to go in the morning, he flung him-

self in front of the door, his arms outstretched and an expression of agony on his face. "Honey, you can't go," he cried. "You're crucifying me when you look like that. Can't you see I can't do without you now? You've twisted your tendrils round my heart." I sat down to talk it over with him, and when I did that I was lost.

It wouldn't be true to say that to-day I cannot understand those six months. But I can understand them only as I might understand a stranger's story. Jack wasn't only ridiculous and pathetic. He was patronizing and proprietorial. "I sometimes think, honey," he would remark pompously after a visit to his home, "that you'd be capable of bringing my sweet babes up." In the pubs of the neighbourhood he always spoke of me as his wife, though I told him whenever I heard him that I would not stand it. My presence in the basement gave him a new and unhappy burst of self-confidence. He began to think of bettering himself, to talk a great deal in his shop, to boast of his ambitions before his superiors. He took to buying little booklets about business efficiency and reading them over the fireside in the evening. The only result was that he lost his job. When I swore, as I often did, he would bridle like a spinster. "Is this entirely necessary?" he would ask. "That language, honey, from your dear, pure lips. God Almighty, the sting of it!" The schoolmistress vocabulary in which he talked of the simplest events of everyday life carried an implied rebuke to my own coarseness of speech. If a bottle of beer was stick-

ing to the mantelpiece he would ask: "Honey, isn't the beer—er—adhering there?", the moment's hesitation studiously pointing the example I was expected to follow.

Richard's letters continued to arrive, as lifeless as a schoolboy's Sunday scrawl to his parents. "This is a very pretty place," they read. "We had a lot to drink down at the Club the other night. I have a boil on my neck." Behind the sloping lines I could see conscience only anxious to fill the formal two pages and turn to the third before dismissing me happily from thought for another week. Then there came a morning when I called at the flat and there was nothing for me. I returned the next day, and the next, and still no envelope had come. My monthly allowance was overdue, and even if Jack had not been with me, I had no money to keep myself. I didn't need to wrestle with repulsion very long. I went back to the streets.

It was the old routine of my first days there, for I could not bring my men back to the basement. The lights of Piccadilly, the darkened taxi, the large brass bed of the little hotel: it seemed as though nothing had ever happened between. When I returned home, Jack would make me a cup of tea, or pack me off to bed if I looked tired. I couldn't talk to him of my successes or failures, for he loathed the thought of prostitution. "Honey," he would say, "if you don't mind, let's forget that distressing subject." The next morning he would accept the shopping money as if he had forgotten. And when he wanted to make love to me, I might have been

a second Virgin Mary.

I still wanted to escape from him. When I tried, he fell into hysterics; on one occasion he even barricaded the door with the furniture. Twice or three times I did succeed in getting out, but he followed me about the streets muttering: "Don't leave me, honey. Don't go, don't go, don't." It was less embarrassing to stay on, so I stayed.

Winter changed to spring and spring to summer, and Richard's letters started again. He had an assured post now, and was beginning to talk of bringing me out. At last came a letter which enclosed a cheque for my fare and expenses. Jack pleaded piteously with me to stop with him, but I had only needed such a jolt to free myself. Richard's sister Barbara and her husband had not heard how I had spent the last six months. They made the arrangements for my voyage and ate a farewell dinner with me.

Jack and my mother saw me tearfully off at Tilbury. As I mounted the gangway I felt I had said good-bye to my old world.

CHAPTER XIII

It drizzled going through the Channel, but in the Bay we came out into bright sunshine. The scarred rock of Gibraltar loomed up on our left like a monumental stone that an amateur sculptor had been playing with. We ran to the side to see the silver silvers of flying fish, the smooth black line of a shoal of porpoises rhythmically diving and emerging, the distant white plume of a spouting whale. Beneath our feet vibrated tirelessly the regular beat of the engines, lulling us into a beneficent coma.

It was a friendly, one-class boat, with only eight passengers on board, though there was room for forty. For the first forty-eight hours it was impossible to say good-morning or even ask for the bread without drawing a suspicious or disapproving look. Then reserve broke down, and I was born again, to become the ship's baby. I ran round the deck hunting deck-tennis partners. I floundered shrieking in the canvas swimming-pool. At all the ports I bought sticky bags of bull's-eyes for the placid, broad-faced captain, who looked as if he slept with his perpetual cigar in his mouth. Everyone teased me. They wouldn't believe I was married, they said. I was too young.

Everyone liked me too. My best friend was Janet Molman, a Yorkshire girl who was going out to meet her husband, manager in one of the big Singapore stores. She was small, fair-haired, pink-and-white, always giggling and carried about with her the robust atmosphere of a provincial suburbia. She came from the sort of family in which the sisters write to each other every week, and she was incapable of unkindness. Sharing my cabin, but less intimate with me, was a pretty Mrs Fielding, who was joining her husband at Shanghai. She had a large store of Woolworth trinkets, drank cocktails freely and inclined to drop her aitches when she became excited. In England, she told me, she had simultaneously run a business and acted as mother to three of her sister's children. Miss Dean, with the face of a carelessly carved turnip and little pig's eyes, was travelling out to be a schoolmistress in Singapore. It was difficult to believe that her pursed schoolmarm's mouth belonged to the same being as her lovely boyish figure. She had enough private money to dress well and gave us to understand that she only taught in order to occupy her time. When the other women talked of their husbands she would begin to tell of an Army officer she had once met aboard ship who had proposed to her. He had written to her regularly for a long time, but though his letters had now ceased she maintained that they were still officially engaged. Behind her back we agreed that she would never see her officer again. Her constant companion on the boat was a Captain Conway, a stolid, stone-deaf bridge-fiend, who was go-

ing to Vancouver by way of the East to retire. Captain Conway was the last man one would have credited with acting on impulse, yet one morning he stumped down below for the air-gun he kept in his luggage and silently picked off with one shot a beautiful unknown bird that had come to rest on our cross-trees. It was an exotic bird that might have flown straight out of the Arabian Nights. The turquoise blue of its breast melted, on the wings, into every kind of delicate pastel shade. Captain Conway couldn't eat it, he had no materials to stuff it. When it had fallen on the deck he picked it up, turned it over incuriously and stumped down to his cabin with the gun. He couldn't explain to himself or anyone else why he had shot the bird, and for twenty-four hours the whole ship, even Miss Dean, ostracized him.

We reached Port Said in the early morning, a strange, dead gateway to the East. Monotonously chanting natives wreathed the coal-barges. A huddle of ships were queuing for their turn to go through the Canal. Only the sun, that had drained the town of its life, saved its disjointed dirty white streets from being a masterpiece of ugliness. I might have felt cheated in my introduction to the Orient if it hadn't been for the chattering vendors who besieged our light-hearted shore party and the sleeping bodies that strewed the heat-drenched pavements.

The ship entered the Canal at dusk, and I stayed on deck all night to watch the passage. When light came it unrolled a frieze of camels, palm trees, spreading

and and dhows with great sails. With the Red Sea, the heat closed in like a furnace. Trying to sleep in the cabin at night, you felt the ceiling pressing down on you. The water was a heavy bottle-green colour, as thick as gelatine. The intense sun seemed to have leached all the blue out of the sky. I couldn't believe the salty oppression would ever come to an end.

At glaring, treeless Aden a breeze woke, and then our next landfall was Penang, two thousand miles across the Indian Ocean. As the voyage drew near its close I began to feel almost miserable. My fellow-passengers had been the first real people I had known for so long. For the first time for years I myself had been treated as a real person instead of a pet or a houri. I wasn't pitied, I wasn't idolized: I was teased. I had recovered my buried youth and innocence and irresponsibility in the air of calm and casual friendship, untroubled for after the bought or feverish intimacies of my past. I asked myself how long happiness could last. But then Richard had sent for me and Richard was waiting for me. It must be safe.

And then it was a Richard ten years older who walked up the gangway at Port Swettenham to greet me. His eyes were bloodshot; a network of fine lines had gathered into crow's-feet at their corners. His stomach had distended into the beginning of a paunch. His lower lip protruded like that of a public-house bully. His first words to me were a complaint: "Why weren't you at the rail to wave to me?"

Alone in a land that I did not know, I found my-

self desperately trying to make conversation to a stranger. Richard didn't help me. I asked him how he was, whether he was glad to see me, how he liked his job. He answered morosely in single sentences and inquired almost as an afterthought how I had enjoyed the voyage. Before his cold irresponsiveness the spring of gaiety with which I had been waiting to hail him froze. He stood by silently as Malay porters piled my baggage into his large blue car. I wished I was back in the boat again. I didn't understand.

Over the hotel breakfast table at Kuala Lumpur, Richard attempted to recover his old vein of schoolboy cheerfulness. But I could see the jokes ponderously gathering behind his forehead. He didn't expect them to succeed, and as soon as they had left his lips they extinguished themselves in silence. We climbed mutely into the car again for the eighty-mile drive to our home. I nearly burst into hysterical laughter at the contrast between the abounding life of the country and the deadness within us both. The road twisted through acres of brilliant green rice-fields, where patches of muddy water, discoloured with wash from the tin-mines, glistened in the gathering heat. Fat grey Kerbaus wallowed in pools of slime at the roadside, almost obliterated in mud but for a crumpled pair of horns and a mangy tail. Cows and bulls, bleating calves with tinkling bells round their necks, drifted aimlessly across our path till the shrill voice of a Tamil herdsman recalled them to safety. Pariah dogs rose, scratched a flea and dragged their emaciated limbs a few yards

farther on. Chickens scuttled into the thicket at the last moment, clucking and flapping their wings.

• Then we had left the kampongs and the open country behind us and were mounting the hill into the jungle. Thick, impenetrable undergrowth covered the banks on either side. Tangled ferns spread their leaves like an Aubrey Beardsley nightmare. Tree-tops as glaring in their colour contrast as a sixpenny flower calendar melted in the distance into brush-strokes of reseda and palest brown. Here and there an occasional fallen branch blazed in red and gold, like the disheartened beginnings of a dispirited autumn. Trailing convolvulus draped itself over the roadway; parasitical creepers, like tassels of twisted cord, descended from the tree-trunks. Stunted orchids, cold and expressionless, flowered in the few bare patches. Above our heads the sulky sky impended lower and lower, like a canopy slowly dropped from heaven. The monotonous silence was only broken by the sound of our car and the chirping of millions of grasshoppers, that might have been a chorus of dripping taps. Rising in tiers and falling away behind us were wave after wave of blue hills.

And at last we left the jungle behind for a main street of meagre wooden shops, smelling of fish, uncured leather, dirty clothes and cheap hair lotions. We turned up a steep and narrow by-road, the drives of European houses leading off it every twenty yards. We drew up before the front porch of a large and neglected bungalow. We were home.

Behind the closed shutters most of the darkened

rooms through which Richard curtly showed me were bare of furniture. Even those we were habitually to occupy contained only the scantiest minimum. The lounge leading from the porch to the dining-room had half a dozen long wicker chairs, piled with faded chintz cushions, and a brass palm table. A square black table stood in the middle of the dining-room, there was a sideboard against either wall, and a couple of sombre prints, dangling at irregular angles, looked down on the terracotta stone slabs of the unmatted floor. Upstairs, the only three rooms furnished were my bedroom, Richard's and a little study. In this was a writing-table, covered with jumbled papers and dead insects. The bedrooms were furnished with heavy, round-knobbed wardrobes and marble-topped wash-stands. The floors were bare and unpolished and I could have written my name in the dust under my bed.

The entire bungalow bore the dusty marks of slovenly housekeeping. There had not been the slightest attempt to ornament it or make it comfortable. The only trace of decoration was a tooth-glass holding a few wilted flowers, which looked as if they had been crammed into it at the last moment. Torn envelopes and dog's-eared letters were littered everywhere. Among the litter I discovered five books—an Edgar Wallace thriller, a manual of flying, two technical volumes on the diseases of rubber trees, and *My Life and Work*, by Henry Ford. Richard had been taking up flying as a week-end hobby, but Ford's book he regarded almost as sacred. He read it after dinner every night, and

would no more have parted with it than old Captain Cousins would have with his Bible.

• I was there, and I had to settle down to it. We rose at five every morning for a breakfast of tea and fruit. As I dressed Richard would shout at intervals through the door: "Are you ready? Hurry up! I can't wait." There was usually a long, perspiring walk through some estate ahead of us, always in single file, headed by a Tamil clerk. A single attempt cured me of any inclination to comment on the natural beauty round us on these expeditions. "Now you've made me go and miscalculate this damned lot," was Richard's surly response. Richard's work took him for miles through the country. Often I had to pack sufficient clothes for three days if we were going to Bentong, Mentakab or Turantut. Most of the places we visited were even drearier than our home, with their muddy rivers and ill-lit rest-houses. Richard was out all the day, returning only for meals or to sleep. He would enter with heavy tread, grumbling about his arrears of work and bewailing his lack of money. All the time I was with him in Malaya, he never went to bed with me once.

I had known I wasn't coming out East to live a life of luxury. I could make allowances for the bad temper from which a man must occasionally suffer who is engaged on heavy work in a tropical climate. But Richard was never in a good temper. When he wasn't quarrelling with me he was distant and cold. I felt that he had cut me out of his life, and that he resented

my presence with him, if he had only dared to face the fact. More than once, when he complained of the cost of putting me up at the local rest-houses, he came close to saying in so many words that I wasn't worth the money he was spending on me. But "No, no, I can't leave you in the house," he protested, when I suggested that I should stay behind. Convention forbade that. Perhaps convention had also ordered, once he had disclosed he had a wife, that he should bring me out to join him.

There was nothing about which we talked on which we could agree. In the end I learned to avoid all but the most trifling conversation. It was enough for me merely to slap Richard's dog to draw from him a torrent of abuse, which developed into a quarrel that lasted all day. Occasionally after dinner he emerged from his sullen shell over a couple of stings. He began to joke in his old, light-hearted way about his friends, his colleagues, his job. I waited breathlessly, as one who watches a tiny flame in a fire of wet wood, for our old intimacy to be reborn. It never was. He rose abruptly and went to bed.

No one in our circle of acquaintances could give me the friendship Richard denied me. Heads of the local society were the District Officer and his wife. The D. O. was a tall gaunt man who prided himself on his facial resemblance to John Galsworthy. He and his wife, both ardent bridge-fiends, considered themselves in a different class from the common run of English residents. They never said so, but I am sure they would have accepted it as only fitting if the company had risen

when they entered the cardroom at the club. Perhaps they had taken to bridge because it saved them from speaking in their necessary converse with their fellow-Europeans. With them at the moment were staying two young women, former bridesmaids at their wedding. They were of the fair complexion and undistinguished features that men mistake for beauty when their owners are twenty and glance past unseeing when they are thirty. They spent most of their time dancing, playing tennis and driving round the country with a young man named Dennis, whose chief interest lay in the entrapments of his car. They had been sent out East, it appeared, to get husbands, but local rumour declared that they shared Dennis's affections, and the District Officer would have been bitterly insulted if he had heard what was said about them and him behind his back.

Dominating any house she entered by her rasping voice and commanding manner was June Roster, wife of Hubert Roster, a prosperous planter. She was not content with being mistress in her own house; she also ran an amateur knitted wool shop, from which she insisted all her acquaintances should buy. Once she had begun to gossip it was difficult to believe she would ever stop. I imagine she was about forty, but the tropical climate hadn't parched and coarsened her skin, as it does with many women. It had reduced it to an anaemic pallor and then pickled it at the smoothness and bloom of twenty-five. Hubert was known to the club wits, behind his back, as "Yes, dear." He wasn't the nonentity one expects a henpecked husband to be. With his hollow cheeks, his face criss-crossed with

wrinkles and his deep blue penetrating eyes, he might have doubled for Boris Karloff. His hands, stained almost black with nicotine, were delicate and artistic. There was an air about him of one who had been many times on the brink of the grave and bore a gentle resentment against the world that had dragged him back so often. He might have made a pleasant companion, if he had ever been let off his wife's leading-strings. A friend of the Roster's whom we saw at rarer intervals was Peter, owner of a big garage. Peter, with his lanky figure, crablike walk and mincing manner, was an accepted comedian. At dinner he would pepper the salt, put flowers in his hair and announce suddenly, in a loud and anguished voice, that his trousers might come down at any moment as he had forgotten his braces. When he was clean and shaved, which was not very often, he was almost handsome, but his real charm was his slight air of effeminacy. In an aggressively male society it distinguished him enough for him to be a jester and not so much that it made him a butt. Richard had been very intimate with Peter in his bachelor days, and went out of his way to tell me what a highly coloured life he had led then. But it was too late that I learned what might have been his real distinction for me: that though he was a comedian, he hadn't got the comedian's heartlessness.

A group of raucous Australians from the goldmine were the most prominent in the small-change of our club and rest-house acquaintances. Only one of

them was married; his wife, with tow-coloured hair and bottle-glass eyes, had a voice of harsher metal even than his own. There was a Swedish girl who spoke no English and spent her time languidly turning over the pictures in the shiny paper magazines. There was the lifeless young wife of a planter who drooped in perpetual mourning for the loss of her baby. There was an unhappy cripple named Charles who had lost a leg and an eyelid in a car smash, and whose avaricious wife had long ceased to care for him since he filed his petition in bankruptcy. The worst of discontent is that it makes one sympathetic to the discontented. Charles and I used to sit in a corner together, railing at Malaya and its ways. Richard was disgusted, and I despised myself.

The rest-house, a creeper-covered half-timbered building in Olde Englishe style, looked out on a semi-circular nine-hole golf-course. Half the middle-aged women who gathered in front of it to watch the players were recovering from attacks of malaria. Mrs Roster would bring them up to me and introduce them and they would put me through the same dry catechism. Had I a pleasant voyage out? Did I play bridge and golf? Was my husband employed by the Government and how long did I expect to remain in the country? The golf-course resembled an unkempt moat. It lay in a little valley, hemmed in on all sides by hills, jungle paths, turbulent ferns, fan-shaped palms and beds of vivid red and orange cannas. Knitting or sewing over the tea-cups, residents and visitors would dis-

cuss, in voices they couldn't fail to hear, the appearance and character of the golfers.

"Look at Mrs Astley," you would catch. "Did you ever see such a stance? She looks as if she thought she were driving piles."

"That's because of her weak legs, you know. Varicose veins, dear. She told me so herself."

"I always say Mrs Richardson would look almost human if she didn't wear those awful shorts. - Why can't someone tell her? They make her *bulge* so."

"Oh dear, you do make me laugh. I did ask Jack to say something tactful to her Algie about it the other day. I expect he hadn't the courage to pass it on, though."

"They tell me Mrs Graves has been married three times. I wonder why?"

"I can't think why Mrs Cartwright wants to make an exhibition of herself in that salmon-pink jumper with her figure. Now I could have found her something that would have suited her, *and* cheaper too. Of course, my secret is that I buy direct from an English wholesaler. You mightn't believe it, but I was looking at my books yesterday, and I found....."

This of course was Mrs Roster. By the time she had finished explaining the accounts of her shop, Mrs Richardson's shorts had come up for judgment again.

"They say she drinks too."

"Well, I hadn't heard that, but people have been talking a lot about her going about with that Spencer man. They say....."

"Oh, do tell me too."

I am sure that if I had mentioned any book more serious than a detective story or a Denis MacKail the remark would have dropped into an embarrassed silence, which the knitters would have hastened to cover up with saving little straws of gossip. I can hear the comments that would have burst out the moment I had turned away.

"That Mrs Cousins, a bit odd, don't you think, dear?"

"I think she reads."

Around them Malaya was insolent in its beauty. And yet the rest-house gossips had travelled out seven thousand miles to it, only to rail off a private little Surbiton or Malvern of their own.

The new life I had hoped for lay between my silent home and the little Surbiton. I didn't enjoy, in either of them, anything that could be thought of as human converse. There was merely a mechanical exchange of small numbered counters, which was called conversation. My past had been a twisting twilight journey hemmed in between a maze of blank walls. Now the one way out had ended in a blank wall as well. There was a world of emotions within me that cried out to be expressed: affection and loyalty and gratitude and dying hope. They must remain silent. Every day I was meeting with fresh impressions, fresh colour contrasts, fresh customs, fresh turns of speech that I wanted to talk about. There was no one to whom I could talk. I knew well enough by now what

Richard would say if I asked him to share my wonder at anything Malayan. He would tell me not to be romantic. The club circle might be a little more polite in their rebuke to enthusiasm. But: "You'll soon get over that," they would say. They knew. They had.

But it was at another rest-house that I met the man who came nearer than any other in Malaya, perhaps in my life, to giving me perfect companionship. Richard and I arrived there on a Saturday afternoon, motoring in to Kuala Lumpur for a rubber restriction meeting. As we entered the lounge we ran into a little man barefoot, naked except for a sarong and wearing horn-rimmed glasses. Richard introduced me: I stood gaping. There must be some mistake, I thought. He could only be a Malay. I had never before seen a white man in that kind of attire at three in the afternoon.

"This is Bernard," Richard explained. "He's a Government scientist down in Singapore. Clever fellow. Up here collecting bugs, I suppose, Bernard?"

Bernard regarded us both with a serious gaze. He had the slender figure of a boy who shirks games at school, and soft brown eyes that turned up at the corners like those of a Javanese. Richard suggested that he should come down to Kuala Lumpur with us and take me to a cinema while the rubber meeting was on. I didn't imagine he would accept—he hardly looked the kind of man who patronizes the cinema—but he did. I think I was more perturbed than pleased when he said yes. On his face sat the inhuman solemnity of the stage

specialist. Behind every sentence he uttered you felt the weight of an unseen shelf of books. He spoke as emphatically as the specialist would, condemning a patient to death. The words didn't dribble out of his mouth, as they did with the club loungers; he pushed them out, and they stood firm where he had pushed them, in ordered array. He looked incapable of laughter or light-heartedness. In the car, at the cinema, at the dinner table, I hardly dared do more than look at him sideways.

Probably he was as shy of me as I was of him. For it was only in the car on the way home that he began to speak freely. As he went on, the single forbidding sentences joined hands to form a shimmering river of talk. I had never heard anyone talk like that before. There was nothing in which he wasn't interested, and if there wasn't nothing about which he didn't know, there was nothing about which he wasn't determined to know. For a moment I thought of him as an echo of Alec, and then I realized that the echo was ten times stronger than the long-faded voice. Alec's Buddhism was merely a well-fitting pose which he had put on because he felt it suited his personality. Bernard wasn't enclosed within his knowledge: he grasped it. He didn't only know about Buddha. He knew about Confucius, who had distilled a religion out of the essence of good manners. He knew about Lao-Tze, the mystical librarian whose single book founded China's third great faith, yet who would never have written it if he hadn't been compelled to by a frontier guard as he made his

way out over the mountains into the unknown. He knew about Mahommed and the great flowering of the Arab spirit that had sent armies marching and swift ships sailing to every corner of the earth with the green banner of Islam. He knew how the Malays had seized even Islam, most unaccommodating of religions, and woven its sober threads into the brilliant pattern of their own riotous mythology. He told us of the balance of nature: of how it had been discovered that such a bird that was an enemy of rubber trees mustn't be killed because it destroyed an insect that was an even worse enemy. He told us of the mating and migrations of fish: an eel, he said, was a traveller just as adventurous as any Columbus. I hardly dared to breathe lest I might interrupt him: I bitterly resented it when Richard insisted we should stop for a glass of beer.

Something dormant was awakened in me that night. It was something that I had long conspired with busy events to bury, something that Richard had seen stir afresh in my new life and scotched with ridicule. Once again I became the wide-eyed child for whom the whole world is a new book, its jacket unsmutched, the clean smell of wet print on its virgin pages crying for it to be opened. I was swept by a desire, sudden and strong as a religious conversion, to escape from my wasted years of idleness, to read all day, to become, if it were ever possible, the kind of person who might talk with Bernard on level terms. He wasn't snobbish. He didn't care for gossip. What was said or thought at the club meant nothing to him. With

him I felt myself drawn into a rarer universe of passionately disinterested thought and curiosity and knowledge above the heads of the crowd.

Richard had a few days' work in the district, so we stayed on at the rest-house and Bernard stayed too. Two days later, with Richard out alone in the jungle, he asked me to give him a game of tennis. I had neither shoes nor racket, so he suggested instead a drive to the Chitamani caves, a dozen miles away.

Half an hour brought us in sight of a colossal limestone rock, looming high above the trees. Its surface from the distance was barren, except for a growth of stunted foliage that crowned its head. It stood completely alone, as though space as well as time had deserted it. Bernard pointed out a small black hollow in the face of the cliff. From where we stood it looked no bigger than a field-mouse's hole. That, he explained, was the entrance to the caves.

We left the car in a side track and followed the narrow path, sodden with the morning's rain, for about a mile. Underfoot slippery roots were waiting to trip us: we bowed our heads to avoid sweeping off the swarms of ants that boiled on overhanging branches. Steps cut by coolies for the excavators led us up the face of the rock, and at last we were face to face not with a tiny hole but with a yawning entrance which might have been that of a Pharaoh's tomb.

Within it was dank and chilly. Only the first chamber of the caves was lit, by a shaft of declining light from a gap higher in the rock. A peculiar smell

hung in the air, stale but not fetid. It might have been the smell of lost prehistory. For beneath the uneven roof, Bernard told me, hundreds of years ago, had lived a vanished race of men. They weren't the shaggy, savage beings, flourishing clubs and gnashing carnivorous teeth, that the comic strips love to depict. They were simple and gentle, drawing a precarious life from the wild fruits of the jungle and the small beasts or fish they managed to catch or trap. Their only weapons were the stone knives and spear heads that they had learned to chip but not to polish; no watchdogs defended their home, for they didn't yet know it was possible to tame animals. When they ventured abroad they must be in constant fear of the wild creatures, stronger and swifter than themselves, against whom their primitive arms were so slender a defence. Probably they hadn't yet discovered how to terrify themselves with imaginary gods and demons more frightening than any real enemy. Certainly they hadn't arrived at inventing the institution of war. Centuries might pass before they found that it was possible to imitate the bounty of nature by sowing crops or planting trees; likely enough they would be wiped out before they did. Property would have been an empty word to them: there was nothing to own. Government they had no need of. Sufficient was the authority of the Old Man who headed the Big Family in which the community consisted. Maybe, indeed, the family's head was an Old Woman and not an Old Man, for it takes intelligence to discover that there is a connection

between love-making and birth, and to the simple mind, the mother is the only creator of the child. Their comfort in the evening was the fire that burned within the cave, and whose rekindling was so difficult that the sacred flame must never be allowed to go out.

Bernard didn't merely tell me of the vanished race. He helped me to try and find their traces for myself. Against the walls were stacked the excavators' wooden implements. He explained how they must be used to avoid breaking possible finds and marked out two squares of earth for us to turn up. I dug furiously: my imagination gave a form to every shapeless lump of stone. The sun was setting, and neither of us had found anything, but Bernard wouldn't allow me to be disappointed. As we threaded our way back to the car, black bats swooping over our heads, he told me of the creatures that had come before man, of all the discarded experiments that had littered the way to the appearance of reason. He pictured the polar cap ascending and descending, steamy forests giving place to icy deserts, as if the ages of geology were the pulse of night and day in a larger frame of time. He showed me life emerging clumsily from the water, floundering beneath the scales of the vast saurians, painfully flapping itself into possession of wings, discarding scales and growing itself fur, finally standing upright on two legs in the bodies of the little men in whose steps we had trodden that afternoon. As he spoke, the confusion of my own little past dropped from my shoulders. I felt myself one with the great stream of wasteful, in-

destructible energy that had conquered so many obstacles and had so many still to conquer. Its history, was my history: I could say "I was a failure as, a dinosaur" just as truly as I could say "I was a failure as a shopgirl." Neither failure mattered much. There was still so much ahead to do and to know.

We climbed out of the car at the rest-house to re-enter a humdrum world in which Richard must be pacified because I was late back. And two days afterwards Bernard left for Singapore, his luggage full of killing bottles, butterfly nets, cameras, microscopes and plant presses. I urged him to come and dine with us next time he was near our home, but as he waved from the driving seat I asked myself whether I should ever be fortunate enough to see him again. A feeling of helpless loss was in my heart as I turned again to go into the house. On the corner of the table was his legacy to me against the weeks and months and might be years of emptiness—three books.

CHAPTER XIV

"I THINK, Sheila, it would be very much better for both of us if you were to go back to England."

Richard had put on his serious voice and picked his way delicately among the shamefaced words.

"What on earth do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, my job's an impossible one from a woman's point of view, and I'm an impossible person to live with."

"I didn't come out here to be made a fool of," I said. "You're keeping something back. What is it? Do you still love me?"

"Oh yes, I'm very fond of you. You're very attractive," Richard conceded.

"Then why are you trying to fling me away like an old boot? What did you bring me out here for at all?"

"I didn't send for you. You wanted to come."

We grounded hard in assertion and contradiction. Richard stuck out his lower lip and sulked.

It was not yet three months since I had arrived from England: rather more than a month since I first met Bernard, and I had just returned from a few weeks' visit to Singapore. Janet Holman, my friend of the

boat, had invited me. We had kept up a regular correspondence since we parted at Port Swettenham, and she ended by asking me down to stay, if I didn't mind sharing a small flat with her, her husband and a young man who lodged with them.

Richard gave me a modest sum as pocket-money and urged me also to call on a Mrs Roote, a distant connection of his mother. The Holmans' flat overlooked a Chinese cemetery. Through the branches of a flowering tree beyond its windows you could see scores of stone slabs, inscribed with gilt characters, emerging from the coarse grass of a hillside. Many of the vaults were guarded by little stone Pekinese, whose frozen snarl and rigidly twisted tail defied the enemies of the dead to approach. Away on the other side stretched the broad blue silk expanse of the harbour, dotted with boats that ranged from the glittering P. and O. liner to the junk with patched or tattered sails. But the life we led might have been lived in any London suburb. Almost every night I was there we went out, to dine, to the cinema, to dance. There was even a Malaya Yorkshireman's dinner—Mr Holman was a Yorkshireman—with the guests in tears by the end of the evening over the posters of Bridlington and Scarborough that decorated the walls and the final throaty chorus of "Ilkla' Moor."

For Singapore, when you get to know it, is merely Hendon Central with the sea round. There are the same rigid class distinctions. The wealthy bankers and high civil servants live in their spacious villas on the

Tanglin estate. For them the minor European employees of the Government and the big firms exist no more socially than does her grocer for the great lady of the suburbs. They are merely "the poor whites," a phrase spoken with an air of infinite condescension. The poor whites, in turn, look down on the group of unhappy Eurasians, who wander disconsolately between two worlds, despising one and despised by the other. The natives, Malays, Tamils and Chinese, do not attain even the meagre social distinction of the suburban workman. One can, after all, sometimes chat with a workman: one only gives orders to or does business with a native. They, in their ignored and chattering thousands, fulfil perhaps the function of an impersonal, necessary force: the borough electricity supply.

Singapore, like the suburbs, finds the cinema the centre of its entertainment programme. The touring theatrical companies that reach it, on their way to Shanghai or Australia, are of much the same standard as those you might see in Outer London. So are the amateur casts that from time to time claim the patronage of Government House and secure the indulgence of the local Press. Singapore, too, has the same graded range of social meeting-places. Highest come the ball-rooms and lounges of the Raffles and Adelphi hotels, where only the inhabitants of the Tanglin estate feel themselves fully at home. Combining the qualities of the pub and the palais de danse are the Great World and the New World, where nobody minds if a man spills his beer, thumps on the table or hurls abuse at the

manager, and Chinese dancing partners may be had at twenty-five cents a dance. Finally, for those who want to remember they are in the East, there is the amusement park, where the brassy gongs that punctuate a grotesque sideshow dance mingle with the blaring of gramophones, the wailing of Malay or Javanese singers, the chattering theatre audience that drowns the voices of its Chinese actors, and the insistent rhythm of a loud-speaker broadcasting from the Singapore station.

The Holmans were companionable and unpretentious, but Richard had asked me to see Mrs Roote, and I was determined to carry out his wishes as far as I could. "Oh yes, your husband's written to me about you," she replied coldly when I rang her up at her Tanglin estate villa. "Of course, we've got the decorators in at the moment and my mornings are booked up with bridge and mah-jong for days ahead. But if you're prepared to put up with that, you could come up and stay for a week or ten days."

I knew as soon as I met Mrs Roote at the tea table that the ten days were going to be an ordeal. She was a woman for whom the most unforgivable sin was not to possess a family tree, and the next not to possess money. Almost her first remarks to me were a criticism of Richard's sister Barbara. "I can't think what induced her to marry that artist creature of hers," she said. "They haven't got a penny between them, and they pig it in some awful little rabbit hutch and the babies keep on coming. I can't understand why she puts up with it." I suggested that there was nothing else for her to do. She was very fond of her husband

and children and probably entirely happy with them. Mrs Roote looked at me cautiously over her teacup as if I had declared myself to be a poached egg. She went on to explain that Mrs Cousins should never have married the Captain. "She was the daughter of a Dr Massinger, of course," she said. "He was a rural dean and came of a very good family. We are distant connections of theirs. She could have made a very much better match if she'd tried to. Poor Ada! Ten years in the home now, is it? But I suppose you've never seen her." She asked me about my life with Richard up country, and I told her a little of our circumstances. Mrs Roote flew into a passion. "Nonsense, child," she said. "I'm sure Richard wouldn't behave like that. You aren't accustomed to his type of man, that's all. It's criminal to exaggerate like that."

Mrs Roote did her best to underline what she thought the difference in our station. She never took me out to bridge or mah-jong with her. When she lent me her car to visit the Holmans she always accompanied the gesture with the question, "I don't think your friends have got a car, have they?" Her favourite topics of conversation were her winnings at cards, the bargains she picked up in the junk shops and the fortunes of her shares. She flared up into daily disputes with her husband, who liked me and took my part against her. Either the servants had neglected their duty, or Mr Roote had taken a second whisky-and-soda before dinner, or he was late in for a meal. "I can't stand it," she would say, stamping her foot in the lining-room door. "My nerves are all on edge." She

had everything, within reason, that money can buy; she could afford to lose two hundred dollars in a morning, at bridge. But I have never met a more discontented woman in my life.

I was glad to find myself in the train for home once more. But when I got out at Kuala Lumpur, Richard was not there to meet me. I rang up all the rest-houses round in vain, and at last, six hours later, he entered my room at the Station Hotel. It was late afternoon, but he didn't ask if I wanted tea. He announced that there was only just time for a flip and drove me off to the Kuala Lumpur Flying Club. Only after he had come down did he tell me that he had given notice to leave our house. "It costs too much to run," he said sourly: the rent was just a tenth of his salary. "But I don't know what I'm going to do with you. I think it would be very much better if you went back to England."

I didn't understand. I began to cry. He explained that he had got a three months' job on the Temerloh River, where the only accommodation was a houseboat grounded on the muddy bank. I said if it were only three months, why couldn't I come with him? What was a wife for, after all? He shrank back at the suggestion: evidently he hadn't anticipated it. I could see him hunting for the little masculine excuses which he compressed between precise lips. Living at such close quarters would be impossible, he said. He would be worrying about me all day at his work, going out by himself in a motor boat and leaving me alone thirty miles from the nearest white man.

"I'm impossible," he concluded lamely. "Something's got into me, I don't know what it is."

There was nothing to do about it. So I blew my nose and suggested that I should stay at the local rest-house for a fortnight and then go down and look for a job in Singapore. Richard's delight was transparent. He was almost his old boyish self as he took the wheel to drive me to my temporary quarters. Peter, the comedian garage proprietor, was there and gave me over the dinner table the name of a suitable Singapore boarding-house. Richard's manner to me was far less that of a husband towards the wife from whom he is parting than that of a father who has just succeeded in depositing a difficult daughter at a boarding-school.

Only one more day of that up-country life before I finally left for the city sticks in my memory. I had asked for some new clothes, and Richard had promised to send the car to take me into Kuala Lumpur and get them. I must be back by evening, he added. A night in the Majestic would be too expensive. Half-way here, the car broke down, on a stretch of the road where the only visible sign of civilization was the pit-head of an abandoned tin-mine. The smiling Javanese driver dived beneath the bonnet. His companion, a broken-toothed Malay stinking of sweat and Soir de Paris scent, stood helpless by the roadside. A heavy rain began to fall, and a look of misery came over his face as he contemplated the ruin of his clothes—white linen trousers with a broad blue stripe down the sides, white silk shirt and a velvet skull-cap. We stopped two Chinese lorries, which tried in vain to tow us in,

and finally I hailed a mosquito bus, a vehicle not generally used by Europeans, and travelled in that to Kuala Lumpur.

Peter sent out at once to the car. He found it would take at least a week to set right. So he booked a room for me at the Majestic and persuaded me to buy an evening dress and a hundred dollars' worth of other clothes and took me out to a night-club where we danced. It was an innocuous little excursion that exposed Richard more than me: when the boys came in from guarding the car I found that he had not given them a penny of money and they had been without food all day. But a month or two later he used the outing as a pretext for one more attempt to make me break the bonds between us.

Seaview House, the boarding-house that Peter had recommended, was a square white building set in an expanse of canna beds. It was kept by a Mrs Parsons, a fat rabbit-faced woman who wallowed into her kitchen with the same plaintive exclamations every morning after her shopping expedition, followed by a train of lean and despondent servants. Mr Parsons, a little man with a mouthful of false teeth who might have been a parasite of his wife's, consoled his ineffectiveness by playing at the country square. Almost as soon as the sun was risen you would hear, from bed, a sound of shots in the garden. That was Mr Parsons, strolling round the half-acre patch with an air-gun under his arm, shooting cats and sparrows. Most vocal of the boarders was a retired ship's engineer named Simmons who talked of ship-building from morning to night.

He wore a long grey moustache that was constantly getting into the curry, and carried an unfurled cotton umbrella hooked over his arm in the finest weather. I saw more of young Derek Oakham, employee of a Singapore shop, bald already at twenty-two and for ever lamenting the poverty that prevented him from marrying the girl in England to whom he was engaged. The Parsons, who knew his parents, did their best to prevent me from going out with him lest I should steal him from her.

But there was soon little left for me to do except go out with young men. Unskilled jobs, I found, were difficult to get in Singapore, for most of them are snapped up by Eurasians. After many disappointments I secured a post as hostess in a café. It only lasted a fortnight. I had no wish to recommence in the Far East my life as a prostitute, and that, the customers' expectant attentions hinted, was what I was paid to be. I was more in need of a salary than ever, too. Richard, who had given me a reasonable allowance to start with, had received the bill for the clothes I bought on my Kuala Lumpur excursion. It amounted to less than a fifth of his monthly pay, but he called it gross extravagance. I obviously couldn't be trusted with money, and he would have to save for weeks to pay the debt. He cut my dole down at once to a hundred dollars a month. Since he could afford to fly every week-end and run a car, I imagined it was merely an attempt to shoulder on me the responsibility of breaking up our marriage.

That was the last letter I had from him. His

monthly cheques arrived regularly, but there was no line of writing to accompany them. At Christmas he sent me an extra five dollars. I didn't know what to think of the marriage. It was neither dead nor alive. I was living in a half-world in which precise relations had ceased to exist. It was as useless to hunt for them as for a man to stand who has lost his sense of balance. All I could do was to accept the fortune of each day.

I had called on Bernard as soon as I got down to Singapore. He drove me home, and only when I had descended asked, almost as if it were an afterthought "Oh, Mrs Cousins, won't you come out with me one night?" Before long I was dining and dancing with him twice a week. One night when we had left the Great World he pressed my hand as I got into the car and asked me to shut my eyes till he told me to open them. When he gave the word I found that we had drawn up before his house. It was too delicate an invitation to love-making to resist. He had all my admiration already. And what obligation of loyalty was there that bound me to say no?

His neat little writing on a note, his springy, dapper walk as he entered a hotel lounge to greet me, the stiff spring of determination in his meticulous mind, began to bite their way into my life as a screw that is turned. He told me how he had been born asthmatic and weakly and made himself into an athlete because he would not be despised. I saw him play tennis so hard that he grew white in the face. I knew the glitter of the silver cups that stood on his mantelpiece. I learned, in loving him, how even adultery in Singa-

pore must be respectably arranged. I could never stay a whole night with him. I must be out of the house and in my own by dawn. The man he shared with, a plump, pipe-smoking civil servant, had his love-affair too. For years he had been attached to an English nurse who worked in an up-country Malay State. But when she came down to see him, she must stay in the bungalow of a neighbouring widow. Only through the connivance of her chaperone could she stay on, far into the morning, with her lover. Perhaps it was necessary. Gossip seemed to have a keener edge in the Far East, and the community was small. Hardly anywhere you went could you escape the lifted hand of recognition. In the end you came almost to ward it off as if it were a blow.

I didn't stay for long at Seaview House. Mrs Parsons wanted my room for a German boarder who had been there before and I had to seek fresh quarters. Within the bounds of my allowance I had little choice. A fellow-lodger told me of an Austrian named Alois who would not overcharge me. "You'll find him a strange man," she warned me. The house was none too clean and the furniture might have been designed for an Austrian home and shipped there by mistake. Heavy mahogany tables and sideboards filled the dining-room; voluminous red velvet curtains hung over the doors. But when Alois offered me a room with board at eighty dollars a month, I accepted at once.

Alois was a strange man to find as the proprietor of a Malayan boarding-house. He looked much more

like a Central European film star. He was tall, with reflective brown eyes, wavy brown hair and low forehead. His manner was abrupt and dogmatic. When I first arrived he was usually bad-tempered and moody and spent a great deal of his time with the cote of white pigeons which he kept in the back garden. For years he had been writing and rewriting a Life of Christ, but the final script had never got beyond the third chapter. He hated English people and loathed Singapore, but since he had settled there, he said, he was determined not to leave before he had made money out of it. His real vocation was wandering. He had come to Singapore from Austria by way of Hollywood, Majorca and Shanghai. At Hollywood he had earned his living as a scene-painter. In Majorca he had lazed with the writers and picked up the young woman with whom he was now living a life of resigned misery.

Felicity was very pretty but completely lazy and quite useless as a housewife. She couldn't even boil an egg. She would walk about the house with safety-pins holding her clothes together, in place of the buttons which they had progressively shed and which she couldn't be troubled to sew on. When she was very young she had married a wealthy French marquis, and sometimes in her fits of temper she would reproach Alois with taking her away from him and from her rich friends. The reproach was hardly justified. At the time when Alois first met her she was living with an American humorist in Majorca. A few days after their first meeting she had deposited herself on his doorstep with all her luggage. Since then they had

wandered first east and then west again round the globe, living a film star life on a hundredth of a film star's income. Felicity was fiercely possessive, but she gave Alois almost nothing in return for her reckless drafts in his affection. He had wanted a child. Twice she had had miscarriages through fits of hysterics. She couldn't even make love, he told me in his deep guttural voice.

Alois and Felicity both liked me at once. They put me at the same table with them in the dining-room. We sat together in the lounge after dinner. Together we went swimming in the afternoon and planned to spend a holiday in camp on the coast at Christmas. Felicity was pleased when I was taken for her sister. Alois rediscovered his youth and gaiety. Then he began to snub Felicity before me. He picked public quarrels, hoping that I would side with him. I ignored them. Felicity began to be omitted from our bathing parties, and one afternoon Alois tried to make violent love to me a hundred yards out at sea. I refused him and he sulked for two days. I was the first woman, he said, who had ever turned him down.

All this time servants and guests were continuing to drift in and out of the house, the servants behaving exactly as they pleased. On Christmas Eve there was a fierce quarrel at table because Felicity had failed to put up decorations. I could sympathize with her. Outside the windows the sun rained down pitilessly on the white pavements, which reflected the same glasshouse heat they did at midsummer. But Alois, despite his paint-brushes and his volumes of Proust, preserved a

Teutonic sentimentality about home customs. When I came back from the cinema I found he had beaten Felicity up and given her a black eye. The next morning he crept up to my bedroom and implored me to come with him to the beach where we had all three earlier arranged to camp. I refused, and he went off by himself. A few days later he took for himself a house down the coast and moved into it with his shelves of Nietzsche, Dreiser, Shaw, Wilde and Aldous Huxley. In the lodging-house the staff's extravagances began to pass all bounds. One of the boys ran off with a week's takings. Another threw a bicycle at Alois. Alois retorted by throwing a brick. The clientele were slowly melting away and he began to let rooms to Eurasian schoolmistresses and Chinese honeymoon couples.

Alois and Felicity both confided their troubles in me. Alois told me that Felicity was a millstone round his neck, dirty, lazy and a bore in bed. Felicity declared that Alois was all she had in life and that she had given everything she possessed to set him up in the boarding-house. She took the whole of one steamy night to explain this, but when I suggested that the obvious solution was my departure, she implored me not to go. That would only make things worse, she said. Alois would insist that she had driven me away and her life would be made more miserable than ever. But in the end I had to leave.

Miss Levasseur, the proprietress of my third boarding-house, was quite as pathetic a figure, in her way, as Felicity. She was thirty-two years old, short, plump

and a devoted Catholic. But her real heart was neither in her house-keeping nor in her religion, but in literature. Every spare moment that the toils of catering and cleaning left her she would spend at her typewriter revising the typescript of a novel. It had already made one unsuccessful round of the London publishers, but her faith in its merits was unabated. "I think it's got a message," she told me seriously. Miss Levasseur had never been even kissed by a man. The novel, from the passages she read to me, appeared to be drenched in moonlight romance. If she had been less ambitious for it, it might have been a hopeful candidate for *Peg's Paper*. Her other chief anxieties were her salvation and the exploits of her oldest-established boarder. Often she would come up to me miserably in the lounge and say: "Mrs Cousins, I'm doubtful. I have doubts. I can't be certain of my faith. Tell me what I can do." I felt quite unqualified to advise her about her soul, but I could have told her that the only way to deal with Mr Cameron was to turn him out. Mr Cameron had been in the house for several years, drinking more heavily as each year went by. He said his potations were necessary to drown the memory of his marriage. Tearfully he would recount how he had married a beautiful girl out of a convent, the loveliest girl who ever walked. But as often as he made love to her she would clutch the bed and scream. She had left him five years ago and was now living a thousand miles away in Hong-Kong. "I love my wife, Mrs Cousins, I love my wife," he would conclude his tale, tears streaming down his face. When he came home very drunk, he

would as likely as not refuse to pay his rickshaw bo and try to drive the man off with blows. In the en he solved Miss Levasseur's hesitancies about him by running off, owing money both to her and to his firm. W vainly searched his room for any valuables that coul be sold to pay his debt. All we found was unpaid bill and patent-medicine bottles.

I was still going out with Bernard, whose leave wa due in a few weeks. Something of the dreamlik quality of our first outings had faded. I realized tha I had been building up an unacknowledged hope tha he would take me away from my husband and marry me himself, and as I saw more of him I understood tha hope was vain. The freedom of his spirit stopped shor when it confronted the possibility of having to dare the whispered asides of the drawing-rooms and the offices. His favourite phrase to dismiss a tangled situation was "It's messy." He had been brought up in a conventional family, and so he believed not only that a relation could be messy in itself, but that the gossip of his acquaintances could make it so. But I never quarrelled with him. There was a cool dignity about him that made it impossible. It would have been like boxing the ears of a fawn.

On the evenings when I wasn't with Bernard I went out with a boarder of Miss Levasseur's, a Mr Creech, who worked in the naval office. He took me to sergeants' mess hops, held in a square little hall hung with flags and with a beer and sandwich bar in the corner. Alois had finally driven Felicity out a few weeks after I left, and we went bathing together down

the coast by moonlight, the phosphorescence of the silky water slipping through our fingers as we tried to grasp it. • He became my lover. There was no reason now why he shouldn't.

After my rent was paid I had only twenty dollars a month of my allowance left for everything else. One day in the spring I found myself short and wrote to Richard for five dollars. He didn't answer. I wrote again. • He was silent still. I had grown used to his existing for me no more than as a monthly signature on a slip of paper. But behind that signature I had imagined the remains of a feeling of protectiveness for me. Now, it seemed, even that had gone. I might slip back into the void out of which I had come into his life, and he wouldn't care. I was seized by a desperate need to know the truth of his feelings for me, even if it were the worst I had pictured. I went to Mr Roote, told him as little as I needed to about my position and borrowed fifty dollars from him. Then I wrote to Richard once more and a day later took the train to Kuala Lumpur.

It was night and I sat in the bar drinking whiskies and the train rattled and I cried and we stopped at endless little wayside jungle stations that seemed as meaningless as my journey. There was no one at the station at Kuala Lumpur, so I took a room at the hotel and rang up Peter. When I asked him where Richard was, he grew evasive but said he would try to get hold of him and invited me to breakfast. And presently Richard rang up, from Bentong, he said, and declared he couldn't possibly come to see me unless it was very

important. I told him it was, and he promised he would try to get down. And suddenly I remembered it was my birthday, and I began to cry again.

It was afternoon before Richard arrived, in electric-blue coat, lemon-yellow shirt and shorts. He sat awkwardly on the edge of the clothes-basket. His lower lip stuck out more than ever and he looked as if he had been drinking a great deal of beer. He offered to increase my allowance to a hundred and forty dollars a month, but I felt it couldn't end there. I must know what was wrong. He shuffled his feet and said he ought never to have brought me out. I pressed him further and he declared that the trouble went a long way back, back to our poverty-stricken days in Hampstead, back to his mother being put away and mine getting herself into her perpetual scrapes. I knew he was making up reasons. I must know.

"I suppose you remember you married me off the streets," I said, "and now you want me to go back."

"Oh no," he protested. It was a polite denial.

"I've simply fallen out of love with you," he said. "I don't know why."

As they dropped from his mouth the words all rang cracked. They were toy words, little toy bricks. For a hideous moment I saw us two in the bare bedroom as puppets, jerking our wooden limbs in the pretence of action while something big and dark and ugly overhead decided our real future with a twist of the hand.

I asked him what he was going to do now. Would he send me back to England?

He didn't think he could afford it. The fare was so much.

I reminded him of the little line I had come out by. They had a sailing every few weeks. That demanded the finding of a sailing list, an excuse for comforting, self-deceptive action. He rang for the boy and felt more important. The list was brought. There was a sailing a few weeks ahead. His lips moved, as if to show me he was making an inner calculation. He said I could go by the boat and he would continue my allowance in England. Once we had decided that, his only anxiety seemed to be that he should get me as soon as possible on the return train for Singapore. I was too tired and miserable to leave again at once. He turned to go. As he reached the door he looked back and asked me if I would have a drink. I refused. The door slammed. That was the last I saw of Richard.

I didn't sleep. I cried all that night. In the morning I rang up Peter and he came to see me. I asked him whether there was another woman. He hesitated and then told me there was. She was a Chinese dancer, he said. Richard had left her parked in the car outside his hotel.

"Don't you make a fool of yourself out of Richard," he said. "Get all you can out of him." He patted me on the shoulder. I wished I had known him before.

"Anyway," he went on, "you've been very naughty yourself." So Richard had been excusing himself to his friends, I thought, by telling them of my past. It didn't matter now. I let Peter put me on the night train.

When I got back to Miss Levasseur's I shut myself into my room and refused to eat. I borrowed a typewriter and started to write this story. I wanted to clear my mind. There was only one thing definite and hard in it that made itself felt above the tumult and confusion: the regular, persistent pulse of pain. Always I came back to the question: But why? Why had Richard pushed me away as he had? Why had our light-hearted companionship melted into the air? All the silly private jokes we had shared, and his crying the night before he left me for Malaya, and the dumb devotion there was in his look as he gazed at me across the fire at Hampstead, had they really never happened? Or can the past slip back and happy things unhappen? Had someone told him of my living with Jack in Seven Dials? Would that have made all the difference? Could that have cancelled all our happy times? Could he have known it and never told me all those months that he knew?

It was a week before I came out again. Now that I knew I was leaving, houses, people, sights in the streets that I had taken for granted became very bright and brittle and clear. I walked in a world that might have been newly created each minute and in which the humblest objects had acquired an inexplicable preciousness. The frieze of Singapore's background leapt into stereoscopic life: the Tamils, tall, silent and stinking of coconut butter, their bodies a bone frame with the skin stretched over it; the Chinese rickshaw boys, their flat, broken-toothed faces composed to endure a burden that ended only with eternity; the Malays, a race of

brilliant children born to be happy who had been robbed of their happiness and still smilingly hunted for it.* The millionaire Chinese proprietor of the Tiger Balm Ointment, with his great car in the form of a tiger, the bonnet its grimacing face, the headlamps its eyes, the mudguards its striped and terrible paws; the jumble of junk and jewellery in the stalls of the merchants at the amusement park, where a coloured print of the Good Shepherd had toppled over and rested on the bosom of a formidable colour-printed naked lady. The flowering trees in the parks, the high-pitched chatter of the streets, the silent Englishmen of the Raffles lounge, the fringe of coconut palms that led down to the lonely bathing strand, the birds you often heard but never saw. They crowded in on me from every side, and I was leaving them.

Ahead of me was nothing but wet and smoky London and a basement flat filled with my mother's hysterics. I couldn't see farther. I didn't ask what was the door out from that flat. I began to drink heavily, to smoke too much. The night before I left I sat up till dawn drinking champagne with Alois. He drove me, leaden-headed, down to the boat and put me abroad.

"I'm in two minds whether to take you off again with all your luggage," he said as we sat miserably in the bar.

"Why don't you?" I asked.

"I would if it were any other country but Singapore. These bloody English would make our lives a hell for us."

I knew I had only to ask him, and he would take me off. I wanted to. I dreaded leaving. I don't know why I didn't ask him. Instead I said feebly that I might come back some day.

"Don't you ever come back," he said bitterly. "This country gives you nothing and the people give you nothing. They drain you of everything. They don't even leave you hope."

The sun was setting and there was an hour yet before the boat left. He picked me up abruptly and carried me to my bunk and threw me down there. He kissed me and slammed the door. I wanted to cry out after him, a cry that could be heard to the end of the world. I was silent. His steps retreated and died out of hearing. I fell asleep.

I woke suddenly in the middle of the night, still fully clothed. I realized, in a flash of despair, that the engines were throbbing beneath me. There was no going back. If I could throw myself overboard, the fancy crossed the edge of my thoughts, and a wild desire to do it flooded my mind. I put my feet on the floor. I reached unsteadily for the door handle. Then I remembered the lean sharks in the black sea.

On deck I sat in a corner by myself and worked at my embroidery. My sense of loneliness and abandonment was too strong for me to start a conversation. Little by little my fellow-passengers began to talk to me. They called me Greta because I was pale and my hair was long and the curl had gone out except for the ends. There was an old couple who treated me as a daughter and a young girl who worshipped me as if I

had been her games mistress at school. My spirits revived. I played deck tennis, I was in and out of the swimming-pool. I was always first up on the morning deck. I became the ship's pet once more. For three weeks I forgot the future and the past. And then we were nosing our way into the Channel fog again.

I had ten shillings in my bag when I arrived at the basement flat. It was the same one in Finsbury Park. The sitting-room was full of wicker baskets for the eleven cats, and a pot of cods' heads was simmering over the fire and my mother was in the middle of a strident quarrel with the neighbours. Richard's first cheque came a few days later, and a letter from Bernard. He had got to England a month before me, and he asked me to meet him in the Museum, where he had business. He motored me down for a long week-end to Lynton, and we climbed and picked heather and walked in the soft summer rain. But I felt our companionship didn't belong there. It belonged to another frame that was packed away in a dusty box-room now, and on which were beginning to gather the first imperceptible specks of grime. I didn't know what the new frame must hold. I didn't think there was room in it for Bernard and me. He took to shutting himself up in his room with scientific books. "It's no good, Sheila," he said. "I can't stand crowds and vulgarity." But I saw no crowds. I saw only the sea and the sky and the rocks and a few early visitors from the Midlands, with their cotton gloves and their cheap umbrellas, and the bloom of our relation that was beginning to fade.

Richard's second cheque was due when I got back. It didn't arrive. Resignedly I went down to Piccadilly. It need only be once or twice, I hoped. The money was bound to come next week. It didn't. I was sharing a bedroom with my mother, so I took my men to the short-time Paddington hotels. But the neighbours could see me through the curtainless windows making up to go out at night and coming home in the morning. The char-woman, who lived in the same street, realized after three days what I was, and leaned on a broom-handle in the area telling her friends about my clothes instead of working. I could hear the gossip licking down from house to house as fire runs through the stubble. "You heard about 17a? Her daughter's a bleedin' whore."

The third week came, and still there was no letter from Richard. I was too disheartened to write to him again, and even if he were to reply, his answer would take two months to arrive. I resolved to take a flat in the West End and go back permanently to prostitution. There was nothing else to do.

Two days later Bernard sent me from the country a little stuffed animal which mother misdirected to my new address. It was returned to him and he called at Finsbury Park to inquire the reason why. He didn't give his name. He stood at the top of the steps wrinking his nose like a rabbit and asked if I lived there. "Mrs Cousins has gone away," mother explained. She told him my new home, correctly this time, and he went away without another word.

He never came to see me. A day or two later I

found a letter from him in the morning, explaining about the parcel. "I went down to Finsbury Park to look for you," he said, "and some dreadful old woman came to the door and said you'd gone. I hope this gets you this time. Oh what a mess! I hope it all works out."

I didn't answer.

CHAPTER XV

I KNOW them all now, the prowlers in the streets: sentimentalists, sadists, sensualists, misers, bilkers—and my own kind.

It is eighteen months since that unanswered letter dropped through my box and I broke my last link with the world of daylight. I didn't feel it a tragic decision. I wasn't ashamed. I must live. To go back to the game was the only way. And Piccadilly within a few days had engulfed me within its blind tolerance as if I had never left it.

The 'Dilly hadn't changed. Perhaps the men were better. There were fewer of the War wrecks, limping, drunken ex-officers, with a leering fatherliness that turned sour when the door shut. Maybe the competition was worse. There were more of the Frenchwomen, hard-bitten professionals who spoil the market by taking even ten shillings from a man. They can afford to, for they will go out twenty times a day and stay out, in all weathers, till three and four a.m.

In the background rose still the plaintive voice of my mother, whining for money, threatening to go back to the streets herself if she didn't get it, inextricably entangled with man after shoddy man. The last I heard of was a professional punter, who was wheedling

a quarter's income out of her for an infallible system to make a fortune at the dogs. "If only I had a bit of capital!" he would tell her, sucking his teeth. "I've got everything else. I know ten Yiddishers, all brothers. They'd work it at every track in London. We couldn't fail."

When I reflect abstractly on my job, the worst complaint I have to make against it is its routine. Not the walking: that I often enjoy, with the fresh air, the rain on my face, the mysterious fog that might be the beginning of a story from the *New Arabian Nights*. Not the stripping and lying down: of that I am hardly conscious. The thought that chills me, as I leave my flat at seven, is that once more I must hear to-night, once, twice, three times maybe, the same unending gramophone record of male plantiveness and pity and boastfulness and desire.

For they all talk, the men. I don't encourage them now. When they ask me why I am doing what I am, I tell them because I like it. When they ask me how I came to it. I say because my husband left me. But once they have done what they came to do, they will rise and hesitate and camp themselves in an arm-chair. And they will tell me why their wives left them or how they are misunderstood. Or they will pour out a political discourse to which none of their friends will listen. Or they will simply look at me in silence and then burst out: "What a tragedy!"

That too I must endure, their impotent pity, their excuses. "I feel rather a hypocrite coming here," a young schoolmaster told me last week. "I mean, when

I think I have to teach my boys morality." I imagine he is quite rigid and precise with them. He has a fair moustache and a muscular body and runs a small sports car, and he teaches his boys cricket and mediaeval history as well. He had risen and was pacing up and down the carpet. "What a tragedy your life is," he said. "Don't you ever think of getting out of it?" Yet five minutes before, in bed, he had been using the grossest language to me and begging me to use it too.

That was his third visit to my flat. It is usually at the second visit or the third that men rise and pace the carpet and talk of saving me. On the first day they confine themselves to exclaiming how wonderful it is to meet a girl who's so different. But once the itch to pity has caught them, it will not let them go. They will paint the beauties of a thirty shillings a week job in a milk bar. They will ask me outright whether I'm not afraid of disease. They will do everything except lift a finger to help me out of the profession in which they use me themselves.

If they are misers, their miserliness will come out on their second call. Last Thursday I had a miser, a business man with a large flat in Queen's Gate. He will spend fifty pounds in a day on antique furniture and two hundred on a racing greyhound: the glass-fronted cabinets in his drawing-room are filled with hand-painted flower plates that are never used. He soaks whisky and usually rings up when he is drunk. The first time he met me, he flung three pound notes on the mantelpiece without a question. The second, he held his wallet half-closed so that I shouldn't see what

was in it and carefully extracted two. "I'm a bit hard up to-night," he explained. Since then he has given me an automatic thirty shillings.

Bilkers I don't meet more than once or twice a year. There was one six months ago who asked to stay the night because he had a train to catch and slipped out in the morning while I was still sleeping. There was another a fortnight before who gave me a worthless cheque. I ought to have suspected him. He spoke in a public school accent with a thin twang. He wore a loud grey overcoat with a wasp waist and a belt. He stood before the fireplace jingling his change aggressively in his pockets. "I'm sorry, I haven't got a single note on me," he said when it was done. "I'll have to give you a cheque." He wrote one for two pounds, hesitated over it, tore it up and scribbled one for three instead. "After all, I don't want to do woman down," he declared. "You understand. Here's my driving licence, if it'll make you feel safer about it." I didn't take it: it didn't seem worth while. As he extracted it, the corner of at least one pound note peeped out from his wallet. "To give a woman like you even a fiver is a crime," he said as he opened the door. "You're worth fifty quid." The cheque came back three days later.

I had a sadist last Wednesday, a Birmingham business man I met in pouring rain under the Ritz arcade. He wore a watch-chain and had a heavy signet ring on his finger: his voice sounded as if it were patterned on his hardware. Bluff was a word that might have been made to describe him. Back in my flat he began to

tremble like a young man at the threshold of his first seduction. He wanted to beat me, it appeared. It took me five minutes to talk him out of it, and when I had ended, he apologized. "I didn't know you were an educated woman," he said. He went on to preach to me mistily for half an hour of evolution.

Friday's man wasn't certain whether he wanted most to hurt me or impress me. He had been often before and usually rings up to make an appointment. He is in love with a married woman who is getting a divorce, and cannot go about with her for six months for fear of the King's Proctor. "It's an awful bore," he said, "seeing her every day at parties and not being able to do anything. Still, the only practical thing is to have a mistress. Come on, don't hang about. Strip off your clothes and get into bed."

Only three of the ten men I had last week were silent or talked to me as if I were a fellow-human. There was a fatherly business man on Monday who gave me five pounds with scarcely a word. There was a young brewer who followed him who joked about his work. There was a shy youth with a sable-lined overcoat on Tuesday who flung down six pounds and took my telephone number. It was a good week: thirty pounds of receipts. But how much tolerant weariness went to earn it.

I am happier on the game than I was five years ago because I am no longer afraid of my fellow-prostitutes. I didn't set out deliberately to make their acquaintance. It was only casually, encounter by encounter, that I got to know them. "Hullo, dear," they would stop me,

after I had been back for six months. "Got a light? Got a cigarette?" It would have been churlish to refuse, and the cigarette meant a smile next time we met or a street-corner chat at midnight when the 'Dilly began to empty.

They aren't companions one would choose, my fellow street-walkers. If I had to make a composite portrait of one I would give her a low forehead, little ratty eyes, a big mouth, a droop from the corner of the nose to the corner of the lips, and a snub nose that would recall a Pekinese. For most of them their profession has been a rise in the world. If they had gone straight they must have contented themselves with a seventy shillings a week husband and a semi-detached house in the suburbs. They would have had to pinch for their cheap finery, and within a few years a brood of squalling children would have surrounded them. On the streets they make five times what a husband could have brought them, and three-quarters of their talk is of their money and their purchases.

"How much did you give for your dog, dearie?" you will hear at the corner of Sackville Street. It is a fluffy little Cairn.

"Fifteen guineas."

"Emma paid twenty for hers."

"I'm breeding from mine."

Or it will be: "That's a nice little silver fox o' yours. Where d'you get it?"

"Selfridge's. Cost me fifty guineas."

"Ah. You had the luck. I went to Bradley's for mine. Couldn't get them to go under seventy."

You will hear boasting of flats and ponces, too, and half the boasts are true. There is a woman of thirty, odd whom I meet on the 'Dilly often who looks a little servant girl. She has a pug face and wears the plainest taffeta frocks: before she went on the game she was married to a fifty shillings a week railwayman and had five children. Now, she told me, she kept a five pound a week flat and a maid. I was sceptical at first, but I have been there, and it is not a lie. There is a tall, ungainly girl, nearly six feet high, who plods down the pavement with a scrap of mangy fur round her collar. "D'you know, dear," she says, "I keep two places and two telephone numbers, one for lumber and one to live in. I give my ponce twenty pounds a week." Lumber is the business for which we are there: many women do keep two flats. And I know of ponces who draw much more than twenty pounds.

Hardly one of the girl I know is without her man dependant. Without effort they command the happiest mixture of sentiment and money sense. Most of them gamble. Many of them run small businesses, tobacconists or barbers' shops. But there are Mayfair ponces too, well-spoken, quietly dressed men with an offhand drawl whose source of income you would never suspect if you met them lounging against a cocktail bar. Some of the girls are frightened of their men. "I don't know what I'm to do," a tearful figure will halt you at half-past eleven. "I promised my boy I'd bring home ten pounds to-night and I've been pinched once already, and I'm sure I shall be pinched again if I go on walking. I don't know what to tell him." Some of the girls are

suspicious. "I wish my boy would tell me what he does with my money," a young woman who lives in Grosvenor Street complained to me. Her ponce is a Frenchman who takes all her earnings, meets her current expenses and pays the rent of her flat a quarter in advance. "He's banked three thousand for me in two years," she said, "but he banks it in his own name, and I get anxious sometimes. I suppose I oughtn't to be," she reassured herself. "He's a nice boy, and he doesn't need to ponce at all. He's got lots of businesses."

If the tension between the two becomes quite unbearable, the girl has always one resource. She can do her ponce, denounce him to the police. More often the "doing" is the work of another woman. A street-corner quarrel will flare up into a fusillade of screaming threats. "I'll shop your boy, see if I don't," you will hear. "I'll see him inside." So she may, if she goes to the station at once. If she postpones it, her rival is safe. Tarts are too lethargic to remember a grudge.

Often enough the ponce, after a few months, goes to bed with his woman no more. The pair settle down into a humdrum relationship like that of a steady married couple, or a toiling mother and her scapegrace son. The ponce was very likely grateful at first for the money that dropped into his lap. Now he takes it for granted and expects it, and the prostitute is intimidated by his expectation. She knows that only an increase in the allowance he spends in the diddles machines of the smoky Soho clubs can save him for her if another woman offers him more. Reproaches at the

poaching of ponces are the commonest theme of street quarrels.

"What d'you want to take my boy from me for?" you will hear. "I never did anything to you and I gave him two pounds a day."

"Well, I can afford to give him three pounds *and* his clothes, see?"

The row may end in violence, though it will rarely be violence between the two girls. The victim of the poaching will have acquired a new man: she will send him up to rob or smash her rival's flat. The prostitute's occasional longing to exert violence on her men provides ponces with their only useful employment, apart from companionship. I know well enough what would have happened if I had discovered the address of my bogus cheque bilker and gone round to him to complain. "I think you must have made a mistake about this," I should have protested mildly. I can't act out of character. And he would have replied: "Get out, you rotten whore. I've never set eyes on you before. Get out or I'll call the police." If I had a tough ponce, it would have been him I should have sent. He would have wasted no time on politeness. Two sentences would have been enough conversation for him. "You gave my girl a dud cheque. Here's one for you." A smash in the face and he would have been gone.

Most of the girls I talk to display a drab contentment with the street. Their complaint is the same as mine: "They're all alike. One bloody man after another. They all say the same things. Makes you fed up." They never tell me how they started. There

is a tacit agreement that you should be silent about that. We tip each other when a police drive is on. It usually comes towards the end of a month when, we believe, the constables must make up their quota of arrests for the period. Twelve months ago the women would say of me when I had gone: "She's a nice girl." Now, I am sure, it would be: "She's a sweet kid."

In their own way they are as much children as their clients, my fellow-prostitutes, with their conceit and their graspingness and their simple judgments. "You're wearing flat 'eels. Are you a Lesbian?" one of them asked me last week. They will spite out a stream of abuse at a respectable woman who stares at them. Yet they deliberately deck themselves out in clothes that hall-mark them for what they are. Their three-inch-heel patent shoes, their shiny stockings, their ankle bracelets, their tiers of fox furs round the shoulders, come close to being a uniform. Perhaps they know best. The men who prowl the 'Dilly are shrinking creatures, many of them. They need their article to be labelled if they are to have the courage to ask its price.

It isn't often I walk with one of the other girls. Our ways of approach are different, and the men who like us aren't the same. Five years ago I should have been shocked to realize, as walking in couples makes one, that the choice which picks one is the same kind of choice that picks one chop rather than another on the grill. "No, I think I fancy your friend more," I've heard my soliciting smile answered. "I feel like a blonde to-night." That couldn't shock me to-day. But it still embarrasses me, in another girl's flat, to see her put

The sergeant looked at me.

"If the constable was at the lower end of Sackville Street and could hear what I was saying at the upper end, I can only congratulate him on his superhuman powers of hearing," I said.

That was no answer, it appeared. Their faces remained blank and stolid, as if I had said nothing. There was a pause, and then the jumbled words of the charge like a gabbled prayer: "... Insulting words and behaviour whereby a breach of the peace might have been caused."

"Insulting words?" I said. I couldn't understand the catch-phrase terms. "Who have I insulted? The three men I didn't solicit, or the constable for telling him I hadn't solicited them?"

The constable's refined accent began to melt in his temper. "Less of that," he said. "Calling me a liar. You know very well what you did."

The sergeant called a turnkey, a coarse-skinned Irish woman with bitten nails and a mop of greasy hair. "Search this one," he said. "Take her bag, but let her keep her puff." A flat-footed policewoman followed us to the cells.

The yellow light glared down impersonally from overhead. They had left me. I began to cry and to pace desperately up and down the narrow strip of floor. It wasn't the shame of the arrest. It wasn't that the law now had me registered, in ineradicable hand, as what I had been so long. All my memories of the Brixton juvenile court, and the remand home and the industrial school closed in on me closer than the walls. Something large and formless, that I feared and didn't

understand, had me in its grip once more. Once more it had stripped me of my individuality with a phrase and a line of writing in a book. Once more I was not I, but a case, "this one." I cried.

In the cell on my right a drunkard was screaming for iced water. From the other cell came a woman's hard voice: "Pack up that walking." I didn't reply. It was another tart, I could hear.

"Why are you crying?" she said.

I told her.

"Don't you cry," she advised me. "You tell the bastards to beggar themselves."

"I've done my best."

"Is this your first time inside? Don't you worry. I'll be getting out in a few minutes, and I'll bail you out."

It was three hours before they verified my address and set me free. At half-past ten in the morning I was at the court with my slip of paper. They showed me into a long, bare corridor, with shuffling men at one end and bedraggled women at the other. Here and there were tousle-headed policemen, bleary with lack of sleep, robbed of half their importance by the lack of their helmets.

A mild little court missionary, black-clad and spectacled, came up to me. "What's your trouble?" she asked. "Insulting words and behaviour? Are you happy doing what you are?"

"Who is happy? I have my happy days sometimes," I said.

"You're married?"

"Yes."

"Any children?"

"No."

"Well, I won't ask you any more questions. I'll say a few words to the magistrate and see if we can't get you off lightly this time. If you tell me you are thinking of getting some respectable employment it will help," she went on tentatively.

"You can say that," I said.

"Sheila Cousins!" My name was called. They showed me into the dock. I walked unsteadily from lack of sleep and the magistrate seemed very far away. The clerk read the charge and asked me if I pleaded guilty or not guilty.

I'd heard that it's asking for trouble to plead not guilty. The police mark you down at once if you do, my fellow-tarts said. But a resentful spring of reason rose within me against this nonsense of insulting words. I'd insulted nobody.

"If I'm charged with prostitution," I said, "I plead guilty. If I'm charged with insulting words and behaviour, I don't understand the charge."

"We'd better hear the constable," the magistrate said. He mounted the witness-box and repeated the story he had told at the station the night before. The magistrate asked me again what I wished to plead.

"Not guilty," I said.

He was silent for a moment, fiddling with his blotting-paper. He didn't ask me whether I wanted to cross-examine the witness, and I was too tired to think of it. Perhaps his silence was a hint, but it was

the only hint he gave. He looked up from his pad.

"I'm afraid I shall have to fine you ten shillings," he said. "The court missionary informs me that you are endeavouring to secure some kind of employment which will be sufficiently remunerative to remove you from present slough of despair. I trust that may be soon. . . . Next case."

"Sheila Cousins, ten shillings," a constable read from my slip in the fine-room.

"Another nice clean ten-shilling note," said the officer, scratching at the desk.

I descended the steps into the grey morning world.

That is my life. I go to bed usually between one and two in the morning. I get up at half-past ten, when the char calls. I go out on the street at seven. My afternoons and my Sundays I generally keep free: sometimes I spend a week-end with my mother. I go to cinemas and theatre matinées, by myself.

Occasionally there are echoes of my past. Jack will call round, hinting that "since it's Christmas, honey," I might like to buy him a new suit. Andrew still visits me, though his presents have dropped to single pounds. Six months ago I picked up on the 'Dilly an illegitimate brother of Bernard's, or so he said. He had the same voice and the same slanting eyes. The other day, in a teashop, I met a girl who had been at the industrial school with me. She is on the street now. But the real past itself—our country home, and old Adolf and the school and the Browns, and the vacuum-cleaners and Richard and Malaya—seems as clear and remote as though I were looking at it through the wrong

end of a field-glass or appraising it in a picture on the wall.

Of the future I don't think much. I day-dream a little, imagining round the corner of to-morrow some rich man with a cool voice who will come to my flat and look at me and say "No" and take me out of it all. And sometimes I ask myself whether it is true that other people, the reasonable, the fortunate, do indeed go on ahead of their lives, mapping out a path for them to follow. For it seems to me that my life is running on ahead of me, and I am desperately padding behind it trying to catch it up.